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By BRUNO FISCHER

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STORIES

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Which girl was really old Anselm's daughter? Rick Train had to find out—or lose his life!

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MAY 1944

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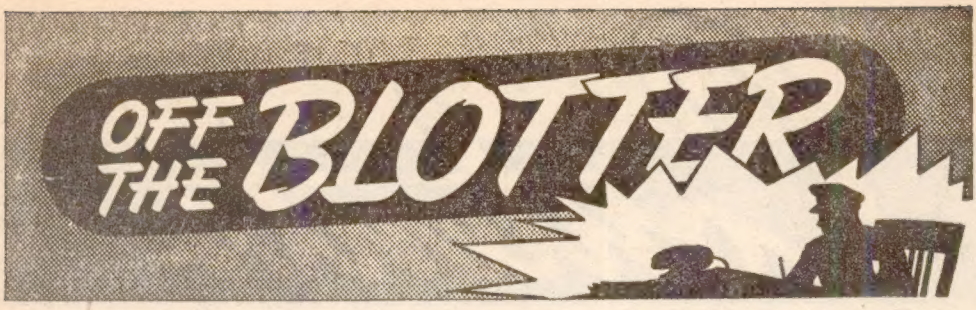
Front cover painting by Arnold Kohn illustrating a scene from "Murder Wears A Skirt."

Back cover painting by Malcolm Smith, depicting a "Picture Crime."

Illustrations by Robert Fuqua, Julian S. Krupa, Malcolm Smith, H. W. McCauley, Arnold Kohn, Swan Studios, Inc.

MAMMOTH DETECTIVE Published quarterly by ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY at 540 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago, 11, Illinois. New York office, 270 Madison Avenue, New York, 16, N. Y. Washington Office, Earle Building, Washington, 4, D. C. Special Washington representative, Col. Harold E. Hartney, Occidental Hotel, London editorial representative, A. Spenser Allberry, Chandos Cottage, Court Road, Ickenham, Uxbridge, Mddx., England. Subscriptions $2.50 (12 issues); Canada, $3.00; Foreign, $3.50. Subscribers should allow at least two weeks for change of address. All communications about subscriptions should be addressed to the Director of Circulation, 540 North Michigan Avenue, Chicago 11 Illinois

Volume 3 Number 2



SOMETIMES your editor buys a story, then sits back and looks at it a long time, before putting it into print. When he does that, it isn't because he's worried about whether or not he's made a mistake, but simply wondering if his readers are smarter than he is!

WHEN we bought "With This Gun" (published two issues ago), we said simply: "A heck of a good action yarn." And the fan mail was gratifying. When we bought "Murder Wears A Halo" we didn't say anything. Editorially (in a picayunish sense) we knew several things: the opening was slow; the corpse didn't appear until more than half the story was over; and there wasn't so much as a single "slam" or "bang" over the whole route of 72,000 words. So we sat still and repeated those things in our mind; then we put it into print with a "billy-be-damned" attitude—and waited.

THERE were extremes of comment: one reader said it was "etched"; another said it was the best detective story ever written. Such enthusiasm in individual cases is natural. But we suddenly discovered there was no "individual" case in this instance, unless we refer to our "readers" as an individual! Quite frankly, you can see our pleased grin radiating all over the Michigan Square Building where our offices are located, and perhaps, over a good share of the Chicago horizon as well.

CAN it be that we are "most" successful as editors of a detective magazine; that we have a magic touch that pleases readers of this type of fiction more than they are ordinarily pleased? We say that because this issue *repeats*, OUTDOES, the last issue. We offer no apologies for the fact that the title of the new novel is "Murder Wears A Skirt"; maybe next issue it'll be wearing a diaper! All we say is: "READ IT!"

MAYBE you think we're blowing our own horn? Okay, listen to this: William Morrow is bringing the *book* out immediately following the magazine publication; the Detective Book Club, membership 80,000, has made it a selection for its membership. When it apppears, it will have a new title "The Hornet's Nest." All we have to say is Bruno Fischer's fine mystery novel is complete in this issue—positive proof that when you buy MAMMOTH DETECTIVE you get one heck of a big quarter's worth!

OUR novel is approximately one-third of our total contents, so it will be worth your while to scan the following paragraphs (where we give you a few points on the other stories in the issue) to make sure you don't skip reading something equally as good in a shorter vein. First we want to introduce a new author, and for our magazine, a novelty author, in so far as she's a woman. We've heard it said women can't write as good detective stories as men. Of course you only have to think of such names as Mary Roberts Rinehart, Phyllis Whitney, Agatha Christie, Leslie Ford, Craig Rice, Amelia Reynolds Long, Mabel Seeley . . . and many others, to make a liar out of anybody who makes such a rash statement. Her name is:

FRANCES DEEGAN. We think she's captured startling realism and done some excellent characterization in her novelet, "Murder Between Dances." We are willing to predict that you'll see her name on our contents page quite often in the future.

ALL of us have been made the butt of a practical joke at one time or another; but when we present "This Will Kill You!" by William Brengle, we assure you there's no "trick" to it. Nothing will spill all over your vest; unless you drool over the story—and you might at that! *We* liked it, and we're as much a fan as you are.

G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS is a name you all know quite well, and you'll probably read "Aunty Loves A Good Murder" without any question in your mind as to whether or not it's going to be good. And you won't be wrong.

WE HAVEN'T missed an "O'Sheen" since this character was launched on his career, and this issue is no exception. This time "O'Sheen Sees Red" and Leroy Yerxa adds another feather to his cap.

(Continued on page 8)

INVENTORS

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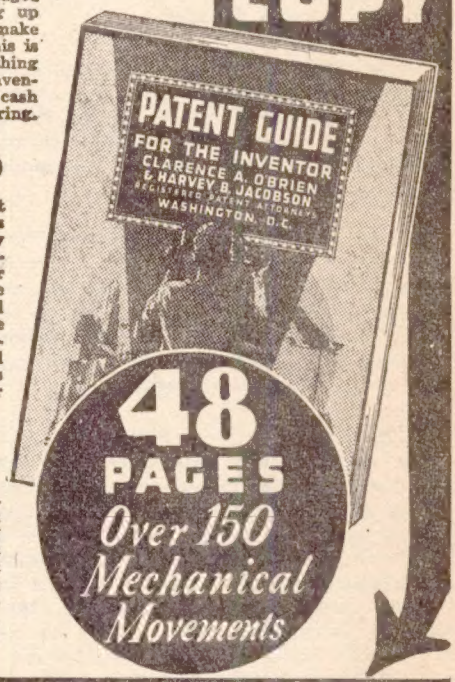

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(Continued from page 6)

ROBERT MARTIN got fan mail from you when he appeared his first time in MAMMOTH DETECTIVE. We expect he'll repeat this time. "Tea Party Frame-Up" will turn out to be far from a "tea party" when you read it, unless it's a cupful of interesting plot and surprise.

"THE UNDERCOVER KID" is a Grant Lane contribution. You've read his stories in a good many magazines, so you ought to know better than we what to expect.

FOR a clever little short-short, read E. E. Halleran's "It's in the Book." A neat little bundle of detective in very few words. It'll fill that half-hour on the bus—but don't go past your stop! There's war work more important, but not as pleasant!

H. WOLFF SALZ offers "Nobody's Diamonds" and here you'll find a very exasperating situation. Certainly *somebody* must own, or at least *want*, these valuable stones! What's wrong with them? Are they poison? If nobody wants them, we'll take . . . hey, why shoot at us! On second thought . . .

THESE days of paper shortages has cut into the magazine racks quite a bit, and some of you may be finding that MAMMOTH DETECTIVE has lost some of its competition, but if you have time for additional reading, take a tip from us. We can recommend at least two fiction magazines that will please you as much as MAMMOTH DETECTIVE, because we publish them! There's AMAZING STORIES, first science fiction magazine in the field (see *Time*, second January issue), and the best (see your editor!) and *Fantastic Adventures*, containing the kind of fiction that made Poe, Ambrose Bierce, Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, and many others famous. For three top technical (and popular) slick magazines, *Flying; Radio News; Popular Photography* all lead their respective fields by a country mile. And when you've finished with them all, send 'em to a soldier!

YOU all remember David Wright O'Brien. He wrote that popular short novel "Once Is Enough." Well, he's teaching aerial gunnery in Utah now, and scheduled to go over any day. We got a letter from him which we'll quote in part because he's a soldier, and what a soldier thinks is important. It's what made him think the things he has that demands our attention—and our humble correction:

"IT PLEASES (the American fighting man) to know that in the mass of hysterically, emotionally deluded humanity back home, there (are) clear-thinking people who refuse to be fooled. It pleases him to know that they are unimpressed as he spills out his guts on a South Pacific beachhead; are seized by ennui at the scant gesture by the waist gunner who's just been decapitated by a 40mm shell from the cannon of a Fock Wulfe. It gladdens his heart to realize, as he sweats out a suicidal raid in a sea of flak and through a wall of hostile fighter opposition, that there are guys back home (who generally manage to be back home) who know that the whole bloody mess is just something concocted to gyp the public out of nylon stockings and two-inch steaks. Thank God for clear, cool-thinking people like this; otherwise it might be difficult to remember that there actually are people who deserve a bayonet in the bowels or a .50 calibre slug through the roof of the mouth. I'm anything but a flag-waving Joe, but I come just a little bit unglued over things like this."

ALTHOUGH all this has nothing to do with detective fiction, let's form a sort of club to "smack down" the next guy we hear loosing talk such as O'Brien must have heard to make him write such a letter to his editor! To us, the American fighting man means more to us than our lives! And we who believe that would do better to *say* so, out loud, and make it possible for him to go into battle knowing his blood isn't being shed for nothing!

JAMES E. CAMPBELL, law clerk to the presiding judge of the Court of Criminal Appeals, Austin, Texas, writes concerning "double jeopardy" in "Murder, Prepaid" in our last issue: He says: "*Former Jeopardy*, as written into this story . . . (has) no application here. (I quote) from the following: *Constitution of Texas, Annotated*, by Harris, pages 118-131. Article 1, Sec. 14: 'No person, for the same offense, shall be twice put in jeopardy of life or liberty.' *Constitution of U. S.* Am. Art. V.: '. . . nor shall any person be subject for the same offense to be twice put in jeopardy of life or limb . . .' *Wharton's Crim. Law*, Vol. 1, Sec. 395: '. . . the crime . . . must be the same and established by the same proof . . .' We have two dead men, different methods of killing, different proof. The judge in the story should have ruled: 'I am astounded that counsel for defendant would urge a motion to quash on a premise too obviously unsound. It almost amounts to contempt of court as being facetious. Motion overruled.' This story proves again that 'a little knowledge is a dangerous thing.'" —*Rap.*

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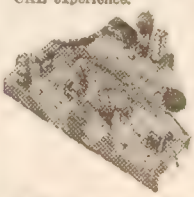

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She lay there crumpled in death, the victim of a ruthless killer

It seemed that there were a lot of people who wanted to kill Rick Train. And all because a dead man had left an ambiguous will and a missing daughter

MURDER Wears a Skirt

By BRUNO FISCHER

THE Army gave Rick seven days to settle his affairs. It took him six minutes, the time required to tell the city editor of the New York *Courier-Express* that he was changing bosses.

The city editor leaned over the desk to pump Rick's hand. "Well, now you'll be able to use your marksmanship for something beside putting holes in circles."

"I'll probably be assigned to a copy-desk on an Army newspaper," Rick said glumly. "So long."

Hal Zeller and four other legmen were waiting for Rick in the city room. The final edition had gone to bed, so the time was precise for celebration. They went to their favorite ginmill on West Street.

At eight o'clock they were animatedly discussing how Rick had broken the Wiggens case while the city police were floundering in deadend alleys. At eight-thirty Hal Zeller told his favorite story of how in the Harrow case he had saved Rick's life by kicking a carving knife out of Jed Harrow's hand when the

blade was within an inch of Rick's jugular.

"You almost broke my jaw with that kick," Rick said.

"Next time I save your life I'll try to be more careful," Hal promised.

At nine o'clock they were on military affairs, instructing Rick on how to win the war. At ten they spoke with bitter envy about foreign correspondents who dashed about in jeeps and dodged bombs and waded through gore and then came home to make a fortune by writing shrill books about it.

Rick brooded into his highball. This was like any other ginmill session, yet for him it should have been a special occasion.

At ten-thirty he found himself alone with Hal Zeller. The others had remembered that they had wives at home who had married them on the supposition that newspapermen no longer were bums.

Hal Zeller stood up. He was a pouchy man with slightly bleary eyes and a fleshy face. He shook Rick's with half-drunken enthusiasm.

"Be seeing you before Uncle Sam gobbles you up," Hal said.

"So long," Rick said.

So then Rick was alone. It was still too early to go home for a man with no family or responsibilities, and too late to call up any of his three or four girl friends.

The bartender hovered over him. "Fill yours up, Mr. Train?"

"No," Rick said. "Ed, if you had seven days—practically six now—before you were inducted into the Army, how would you spend them?"

"With the missus and kids."

"That's a big help," Rick said. His only family was his aunt Susan and his cousin Hertha, and he had spent the previous weekend with them in their upstate home.

OUT in the dimmed-out street Rick loaded his pipe and looked up at the dark spires and ramparts that formed the *Courier-Express* building. He hoped that his desk would be given to that bright young cub Billings. Then he remembered that he hadn't yet cleaned out his desk. This was as good a time as any.

At that hour the city room was deserted except for a sports writer pecking furiously at his typewriter, two drowsy rewrite men matching nickels, and two copydesk men working, as always, with glum concentration. Without removing his hat or coat, Rick sat down behind his desk and went through the drawers one by one. He found three half-empty cans of tobacco, a pink letter from a girl named Devona—now happily married and the mother of two children—stating that she could not live without him, and the first ten pages of a play he had worked on for three years. He was burning Devona's letter in the ashtray when the phone on his desk jangled.

"There's a girl to see you," Katy, the night switchboard operator, said.

"A girl or a woman?"

"Say twenty-five. All right, a woman. She won't give her name. She says it's important."

"Tell her I'm not in," Rick said.

"But I already told her I saw you come in a few minutes ago."

"Tell her I'm busy."

He hung up and read the ten pages of the play. He made a wry face. The telephone rang again.

"She won't go away," Katy said. "She says she'll stay here all night till you come out."

"Is she pretty?"

Katy simpered. "*You* wouldn't think so."

"Then tell her I joined the Army. I no longer work here."

"I heard something about that. Is it a fact?"

"I came here only to clean out my desk."

"I'll tell her," Katy said.

Rick tore the sheets of his play into small squares and made a neat pile of them on his desk. He looked up and saw a thin girl walk timidly between the aisle of steel desks. A fur piece hung from one bony shoulder. She stopped at the copydesk and said something to Benson. Turning in his chair, Benson jabbed a finger toward Rick.

RICK stood up as the girl came over. In spite of the garish coat of make-up she affected, her sharp face had a dead, washed-out appearance.

"Are you the girl who's been trying to see me?" Rick said.

"You're Richard Train, aren't you? Please don't be mad at the switchboard girl. She doesn't know I came in here."

He knew when he was licked. He pulled a chair up beside his desk.

"Have a seat," he said, "but you'll be wasting your time. I'm no longer on this paper."

"The switchboard girl told me." She perched on the edge of the chair and leaned toward him. Her angular body formed a tense arc. "But you could get something into the paper if it's sensational news, couldn't you?"

"If it's sensational, any newspaperman would be glad to take it. Why insist on me?"

"Because you're the only one I know." She smiled. She used orange lipstick and far too much. "I mean, I've never met you before, but I've heard about you. They say you're the best pistol shot in the country. They say you can write anything you please about the most dangerous criminals because they're all afraid of you."

"I'm afraid there are no scalps among my trophies," he said shortly.

"But you're a very good shot?"

"Yes." Rick was watching the way her fingers were opening and closing the clasp of her handbag. "You're frightened."

"No," she said quickly. "No, of course not. I was only telling you how I heard of you. I'm a stranger in New York. I got here only yesterday. I had an idea reporters work all hours of the day and night and it wouldn't matter what time I came here. And I wanted to get it over with before——" She bit her lip. "I've got information worth ten thousand dollars to your paper."

Rick pushed his hat to the back of his head and looked at her in disgust. "For a minute you almost had me going. I thought you were in trouble. Now you turn out to be one of the million people who haunt newspaper offices trying to sell news which generally isn't news."

"But you do pay money for important information, don't you?"

"Sometimes. But it would have to be inside dope on the assassination of Hitler before the boss would part with fifty bucks, let alone ten grand."

She wasn't discouraged. "We could come to terms. This is terribly sensational."

"What's it about?"

She withdrew from him, leaning back in her chair, her eyes suddenly cagy. "First I'll have to make sure you'll pay and how much."

"You're wasting your bargaining talent on me," he told her. "Can't I convince you that I no longer work here?"

HER face fell. She clicked her handbag shut with finality and stood up. There was something so pathetic about the droop of her bony shoulders that he felt sorry for her.

"I'll tell you what," he said. "Why don't you come back tomorrow morning and make your proposition to Hal Zeller? He's a bigger shot around here than I am. If he thinks your story is worth money, the boss will shell out. Not anything like ten thousand dollars, of course, but something."

"Can I tell him you sent me?"

"Sure. Well, good-night."

She did not leave. She stood at the side of his desk, working on her handbag clasp again, and her lower lip quivered.

"Anything else I can do for you?" he asked.

"Please. The streets out there are so dark. I wonder if you'd mind walking me to the subway?"

"Glad to. I was about to leave anyway."

When they were out in the street, he didn't blame her for her nervousness. Even before the dimout, downtown New York at night could be the most desolate place in the world. She kept close to him, leaning her shoulder against his without taking his arm.

"What subway do you want?" he asked her.

"I don't know. The one that takes you uptown."

"What part uptown?"

She glanced over her shoulder as if expecting somebody to be standing behind her. There were only shadows beyond the sickly peripheries of the street lamps. A coupe rolled by slowly and turned the corner.

"I think I'll take a taxi," she said suddenly.

"There's a hack stand on the next block."

She took his arm now. Her ridiculously high heels clicked sharply down the silent street. Once his hand brushed hers, and her flesh might have been coated with ice. He thought then of suggesting that he take her home, but the idea didn't appeal to him. She was hardly, in mood or looks, the company he desired. The cab would deposit her at her front door as safely as *he* could.

She laughed suddenly; the sound was startlingly shrill in that stillness. "You must think me a scared ninny. But these streets are so strange and dark."

There was one cab at the stand. The driver leaned out to open the door. She got in without thanking Rick.

"Good-night," Rick said.

She did not answer. She seemed to have forgotten that he was there. She sat at the edge of the seat and told the driver: "Central Park West and Eighty-First Street." The cab drove off.

Rick started across the street. A coupe swung around the corner, roaring in second speed, and Rick stepped quickly back on the sidewalk. He felt the breeze of the car; he glimpsed the indefinite shape of a woman behind the wheel. Swearing under his breath, he stood watching the coupe catch up to the cab and shoot past it. Then he turned east toward the subway.

HE GOT off at Times Square and strolled up Seventh Avenue, then down Broadway. The dimout cast a depressing pallor over the streets that had once been the brightest in the world, but the gaiety of the people was still there. Soldiers and sailors on leave jammed the sidewalks, many of them with girls on their arms. He wished that he was already in uniform.

Every now and then he would nod to somebody: a notorious gambler on parole, a chorus girl he had dated several times, a gossip columnist from a rival paper, a fellow reporter who was, at the moment, a famous novelist; a gunman who was the best dressed man on Broadway. But no friends to dispel

the bleak October mood he carried.

It was past midnight when he walked across to his hotel on Eighth Avenue and went to bed.

A GENTLE tapping on the door dragged Rick slowly and reluctantly out of sleep. He switched on his bedlamp and looked at his wristwatch on the bedside table. It was one-forty; he had been asleep for more than an hour.

In bare feet he padded to the door. "Who's there?"

"Midge."

Rick turned the snap-lock. A small man in a battered slouch hat and unpressed tweed suit entered. He looked like a little tailor who was used to being pushed around. His pale-blue eyes in crinkled sockets were dull and drowsy. He was a Homicide sergeant, and one of the shrewdest cops in the city.

"Good evening, Rick," Sergeant Midge said in his mild voice. He stepped past Rick into the single room which the hotel management grandiloquently advertised as a bachelor suite.

"You mean good morning," Rick said. "It's a nice hour for social calls."

"I never pay them." Midge's eyes moved about the room with apparent listlessness. Momentarily they stopped at Rick's clothes draped neatly over a chair. "I've heard a lot about your collection of small firearms. I'd like to have a look at it."

"It's packed away for the duration in my aunt's attic upstate. I'm off for the Army."

"I know," Midge said. "I spoke to the switchboard girl at the *Courier-Express* before I came here. Are all your guns there?"

"All but one. How about a drink?"

Midge nodded and Rick went to the cabinet. When he turned with a bottle of bourbon and two glasses, Midge had Rick's pants and jacket off the chair and was examining them.

"Like the suit?" Rick said.

"A nice covert." Midge replaced the jacket over the back of the chair and took one of the glasses from Rick. He drained the bourbon in a single gulp. He did not blink or smack his lips. "Let's see the gun you say you have."

"You mean the gun you didn't find in my pocket?" Rick pulled a valise out of the closet and took out a Smith & Wesson .357 magnum. He handed it to Midge.

"Nice gun," Midge muttered. He did not take it.

"Don't you want a close look at it?"

"I see it," Midge said. "What I want is an automatic. A foreign one or maybe a very old one. I hear you got a lot of guns like that in your collection."

"I told you where they are." Anger touched Rick's voice. "I suppose now you want to search the room?"

"Unless you insist on a warrant."

Breezily Rick waved an arm. "The pure in heart need no refuge behind technicalities. I'll help you."

"I can do all right myself," Midge said. "Meanwhile, you get dressed."

He peered into the closet, selected Rick's topcoat and went over it inch by inch and smelled the material.

Rick said: "Do I need an alibi?"

"Maybe. Say between eleven-thirty and twelve tonight."

"I was riding uptown on the subway and walking along Broadway."

"Alone?"

"Alone," Rick said.

Midge hung the topcoat back on the hanger. When he turned from the closet, Rick was loading his pipe.

"You're coming with me, Rick, so get dressed."

"My bed is soft and the hour is late,"

Rick said, his tone curt with anger.

Sergeant Midge's voice was very mild. "I don't like to get tough, but sometimes I have to."

"And I don't like to be pushed around, especially when I don't know why."

Midge shrugged. The gesture made him look more than ever like a tailor. "You left the *Courier-Express* building tonight with a girl—a skinny girl in her twenties with too much paint on her face and a cheap fur neckpiece. The girl at the switchboard told me."

Rick pulled smoke down into his suddenly constricted lungs. "What happened to her?"

Momentarily Midge's eyes sharpened. "What gives you the idea anything did?"

"Because she——" Rick took another puff. "Because you're Homicide and you're nosing around."

"I keep forgetting you're a bright lad." Midge started for the bathroom to continue his search there.

Rick strode over to him and grabbed his arm. "Damn you, was she murdered?"

"Not completely." Gently he brushed Rick's hand off. "But soon."

CHAPTER II

The Hospital

ON THE way to the hospital, Sergeant Midge said: "She's been shot and she's dying." And that was all Rick could get out of him.

Captain Connell was pacing the fourth floor hospital rotunda. When Rick and Midge stepped out of the elevator, Connell removed his cigar from his beefy face and spilled ashes on his potbelly.

"Well?" Midge asked.

Captain Connell shook his head. "Nothing at all out of her now, though she's still hanging on. Where was Train?"

"Asleep in his room. And from eleven-thirty to twelve, he says, he was roaming Broadway by himself."

Connell looked almost happy. "In other words, no alibi."

Rick said: "Aren't you on speaking terms with me, Captain?"

"I'm going to do a lot of listening to you," Connell said. "But first we're going to see the sights."

Rick and Midge followed him up one of the corridors, silent and empty at that hour. A plainclothesman stood in front of one of the room doors. He pulled the door open, then closed it behind them.

The small room was already crowded with a doctor, two nurses, and a police stenographer who sat at the far side of the bed with pad and pencil ready. The girl on the bed breathed heavily. Her eyes were closed. Her face looked even sharper and more pinched than when Rick had seen it a few hours ago.

"Think she'll come out of it again, Doc?" Captain Connell asked.

"I can't say."

"She won't last long?"

"No," the doctor said. "And I wish you wouldn't smoke that cigar in here."

Connell put the cigar behind his big palm. He turned to Rick. "Who is she?"

"I don't know," Rick said.

"Don't give me that!" Connell snapped. "You were with her tonight. You walked out of the *Courier-Express* building with her."

The two nurses exchanged outraged glances. The doctor said angrily: "Please, Captain, not in here."

CONNELL wasn't fazed. He said, "I guess you're right," and walked

out. Rick and Midge tagged after him to the reception room off the rotunda. The small room was empty. Midge closed the door and stood with his back against it.

"All right, Train, let's have it," Connell demanded.

Rick dropped into an armchair and stretched his long legs. "If I'm involved, I have a right to know what it's all about."

"You know plenty. You're not a reporter now with a God-given right to heckle the police. You're up to your neck in murder. Start talking."

Rick looked at them—at Connell's meaty figure with the immense potbelly jutting toward him, at Midge leaning drowsily against a wall. He said: "Sorry, but I can't give you much. She came up to the city room to sell some inside dope to the paper."

"What dope?"

"She wouldn't say. I told her I was no longer on the paper. I told her to come back tomorrow and proposition Hal Zeller. She said she would. I walked her down to the cab. She said she was nervous in those deserted dimmed-out streets, and I didn't have any reason not to believe her, since she did act high-strung from the beginning. I realize now that it wasn't only the dark streets, as such, she was afraid of. In fact somebody might be waiting down there for her."

Sergeant Midge moved listlessly from the wall. "The hackman says she acted sore at you when she got into his hack. How about that?"

"Not sore," Rick said slowly. "As if knowing that I could not buy her story and had served her purpose in seeing her to the cab. Or as if she was so nervous that she had forgotten I was there."

"What time did she get into the hack?" Connell asked.

"About ten after eleven. Maybe a few minutes later."

Midge nodded. "That's about right. She got it at eleven-forty-five, as she was stepping out of the hack."

"At Central Park West and Eighty-First Street?" Rick asked.

Midge caught him up in a split-second. "How do you know?"

"I heard her tell the driver."

"All right," Connell said. "What's her name and who is she?"

"I told you I don't know."

"You mean to say you were with her all that time and didn't find out anything about her?"

"She didn't tell me and I wasn't particularly interested. About all she mentioned was that she was a stranger in New York." Rick took out his pipe and pouch. "She carried a handbag. Nothing in it?"

Midge sighed. "Funny how a woman will carry so much junk in her bag and not a thing to tell who she is. Laundry and dry-cleaning marks in her clothes, but they'll be a hell of a job to trace if we don't know where she's from."

"I'm tired horsing around," Connell growled. "I want facts, Train."

"So do I." Rick set fire to his pipe. "It's my turn to get some from you."

CONNELL glowered and started to open his mouth. Softly Midge touched the captain's arm.

"He's entitled to it, Captain." Midge turned to Rick. "She had just got out of the hack on the Park side of Central Park West, diagonally across from the museum. She walked a few feet and then turned to the gutter to cross the street. The hack driver saw the whole thing—at least, as much as anybody saw. He heard the shot and saw her fall. It got her in the heart and she fell like a lump of clay. Sometimes a

slug in the heart won't kill them right away."

The tenseness that had been in Rick tightened. He sat very still, waiting.

"There was nobody on the Park side of the street," Midge went on. "And the way she was facing, the shot had to come from across the street. There's a subway kiosk there and a number of people were coming out at the moment. The angle was just right. One of those people fired the shot. The few witnesses we managed to get our hands on say they heard the explosion practically in their ears."

"The bullet could have come from a window," Rick suggested.

Midge shook his head. "The witnesses didn't think so. They swear the sound came from right in front of the kiosk. That's not reliable, I know; it's not easy to place exactly a sudden startling explosion." He permitted himself a smile. "But we found the ejected shell on the sidewalk right there."

"A shell from a unusual make pistol?" Rick asked.

Captain Connell roared: "You're damn right! And you ought to know."

"Let's not jump ahead," Midge told the captain mildly. "Rick could guess that. The first thing I asked him was to see his gun collection." He turned back to Rick. "We don't know what kind of pistol yet. Ballistics is checking the shell now. But one thing they're sure of almost at once: it was not fired from one of the usual make American automatics."

"So this is your case." Rick held up his right hand and tapped his forefinger with his pipe stem. "One, the girl came to see me tonight." He moved to the next finger. "Two, the cab driver thought she acted sore at me, or perhaps afraid of me. Three, I could have hopped an express and changed to a local and come up out of the subway a few moments after she stepped out of the taxi. Four, she was shot by an uncommon gun and I have a lot of those. Five——" The pipe stem stopped at his thumb. "Five—don't tell me one of the witnesses saw me plug her?"

MIDGE studied his crumpled hat. "No. As far as we can find out, nobody saw a thing. You know how dark the streets are these days; anyway, people don't look at each other. There were four or five and perhaps as many as ten people trickling out of the kiosk, and some going down. There was chaos as soon as the shot sounded and the girl across the street fell. A couple of women screamed. People ran, some toward the girl, some away. Cars stopped and there was a traffic jam. The killer would have no trouble calmly walking away or down the subway or even running without being conspicuous."

"No gun-flash?"

"Not that anybody saw. My idea is that he carried a coat over his arm and fired from under it."

"Some shooting!" Rick said.

"I'll say!" Connell barged in. "Central Park West is a wide street. About all that was on the killer's side was that she was standing near a street lamp. But he couldn't bring up his pistol to aim. He shot from his hip, from under a coat and he got her in the heart. That's better than good; that's perfect. There are few men who can shoot like that."

"And I'm one of them," Rick said softly.

"That's right. There's your fifth point against you."

Rick laughed scornfully. "I'm surprised at you men. At Midge, anyway, who has some brains. Do you think I'm dumb enough to kill somebody in

that way and with the kind of gun that would pin the crime on me?"

Complacently Connell patted his potbelly. "You were in a hurry. You found out when she came to see you that you had to get rid of her. You couldn't do it outside the building; that would be too bad. That gun was the only one you could get your hands on in a hurry."

Rick laughed again. He stood up and tapped out his pipe in an ashtray. They watched him in silence. He didn't like it at all. He wondered if any of the people he had greeted on Broadway or Seventh Avenue knew exactly what time it was that they had seen him there.

Sergeant Midge said lazily to his back: "There are only five fingers on your hand, but there can be six points to the case. We couldn't identify the girl. How do you think we knew you were with her tonight?"

"The cab driver, I assume. I didn't know him, but he might know me."

"He didn't. He tried to describe you, but his description was way off, the way they generally are. It was the girl."

Rick turned now. "So she did speak? Well——"

"She talked, all right," Connell blurted joyfully. "For a couple of minutes when they got her into the hospital she was able to say some words. The same two words, over and over. And those words were your name."

Rick looked at his hand holding the pipe. There was no sign of tremor, though inside of him something was jumping.

"So what?" he said quietly.

"So what?" Connell echoed. "Take those five points and then have the dying girl say over and over the name of her murderer, and the D.A. has an airtight case."

RICK said out of sheer bravado which convinced neither them nor himself: "So far you've got all emotion and no facts. I used to pin your ears back in the *Courier-Express* columns when you thought you had stronger cases than that. I can still——"

The plainclothesman who had been guarding the room in which the dying girl lay burst in. "The doc says hurry. She's coming out of it. He thinks maybe she'll say something."

As they stepped into the room, they could hear the girl's ragged breathing. The nurses hovered anxiously at the foot of the bed. The police stenographer leaned forward, his pencil poised over his pad. The doctor, standing at the girl's head, beckoned to Connell.

The captain grabbed Rick's arm to pull him forward. Savagely Rick jerked away and brushed past him. He stepped to the doctor's side and looked down at the girl.

Her eyes were open; they possessed all of her thin face. The pupils were weirdly fixed, staring intently, yet seeming to see nothing.

"I'm Richard Train," Rick said to her. "You want to tell me something, don't you?"

The lips, bloodless where the lipstick had worn off, quivered. A small voice rose from far down in her. It would have been lost except for the breathless hush in the room.

"Richard Train," she said. "Richard . . ."

"You see!" Captain Connell burst out. "She's saying——"

"Quiet." Sergeant Midge drawled the word, but it cut his superior off sharply.

The quiet fell again, empty except for the girl's breathing. Rick bent lower over her. "I'm Richard Train. What are you trying to say?"

Her eyeballs shifted in a face other-

wise as rigid as a deathmask. For an eternity she stared up at Rick's face hanging over hers. Nothing in her eyes indicated recognition, but when she spoke again it was clear that she knew he was there.

"Richard Train," she said. "She . . ." The voice faded and came back. " . . . saw us . . . together."

"Who?" Rick asked.

"She . . . she thinks I . . . told you."

Rick found himself sweating, laboring with her as each word came out agonizingly.

"She thinks you told me what?"

Her eyes closed. Her breathing was very low now. Rick looked up at the stenographer hunched forward on the other side of the bed; he felt the doctor beside him and Captain Connell crowding his back.

"Please!" Rick said to her. "Try to tell me. Can you hear me? Try once more."

Her eyes remained closed, but her lips moved once more. The words came clearer, stronger, as if forced out by a superhuman effort of will.

"She thinks now . . . she'll have to kill . . . kill you too . . . My fault . . ."

The final effort was too much. A tremor shook her and she lay still.

"Who is *she?*" Rick pleaded. "Tell me her name. Just her name. Try."

She lay there like a badly tinted wax figure.

THE doctor pushed Rick out of the way and bent over her. "I shouldn't have allowed it. The strain is too much for her."

"What's the difference?" Connell grunted. "You said she hasn't a chance anyway."

The doctor didn't turn from the bed. He said: "Please leave. If there is any chance to revive her, I'll send for you again."

They straggled out into the corridor and stood there. Rick wiped his face with his handkerchief. He should have felt a lot better, but he didn't.

"Well, that settles three things, anyway," Midge drawled. "She's cleared you of murder, Rick. She said she hadn't told you whatever it was that was responsible for her being shot. And she told us definitely that the killer is a woman."

Dolefully Captain Connell rolled his dead cigar between his lips. "A few minutes ago we had practically a settled case. Now the headaches are only beginning."

"We're lucky we got that much from a girl who's practically dead," Midge pointed out.

"I guess so." Connell tapped Rick's shoulder. "Anyway, you're lucky. I was all ready to wrap you up and take you home."

"Am I lucky?" Rick said.

One of the nurses stuck her head into the corridor. "She's dead," she announced solemnly.

There was silence. Captain Connell decided to apply a match to his cigar. Rick put on his hat.

"So long, gentlemen," Rick said. "If you want me, I'll be around six more days." He started up the corridor at a rapid walk.

"Rick," Midge called.

Rick stopped. "Anything else bothering you?"

"One thing. Maybe that poor girl didn't know what she was talking about. Maybe she did. Anyway, be careful. It's easy for somebody to put a bullet into somebody at night, especially for somebody who can shoot as straight as that."

"You're a big help," Rick said, and went on.

CHAPTER III

Miss Brenda File

RICK walked along the hospital street looking for a taxi. There was none in sight. He stepped off the curb to cross the street—and suddenly there was the sound of a motor in his ears. Glancing to his left, he saw the nose of a car bearing down on him.

He jumped in the direction he had been headed, landed on his toes, and jumped again. The left mudguard nicked his thigh and spun him. Either that or concussion or panic knocked him over. The gutter came up to meet his shoulder.

He rose on his hands and knees and turned his head. The car was going around the corner on two wheels. Its lights were out so that he could not see the license number.

Running footsteps echoed down the deserted street. Somebody bent over him. An anxious voice asked: "You hurt, bud?"

Rick looked up at a face his own age wearing a mustache and glasses.

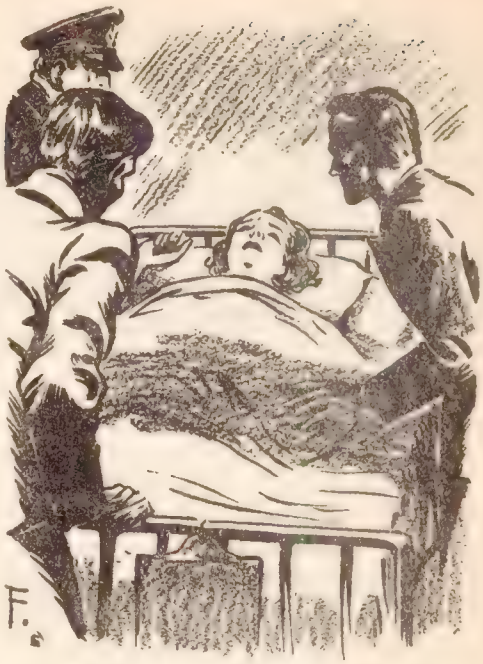
"I'm all right," Rick said.

He started to rise and winced. The man put an arm under Rick's shoulders and helped him up. Leaning against the man, Rick limped to the sidewalk. The stranger seemed the only witness to what had taken place.

"Those crazy women drivers!" the man said. "They shouldn't let 'em drive cars."

Rick felt suddenly very cold. "A woman? Are you sure?"

"Sure I'm sure," the man said. "She was parked in front of the hospital entrance with the motor running and the lights out. I guess that's why she didn't see you crossing the street. Or maybe, being a woman driver, she didn't bother looking where she was going. And



"Who shot you?" Connell demanded

then, when you jumped out of the way, she lost her head and swung the wheel the wrong way."

"You mean as if she were trying to follow me?"

"Yeah. The crazy fool."

Rick rolled up his trouser leg. There was a blue bruise on the thigh and the muscle was stiffening.

"You're lucky, bud," the man told him.

Rick twisted his mouth. Captain Connell had told him the same thing twenty minutes ago.

"Was anybody in the car with the woman?" Rick asked.

"No. I was walking past and all I saw was a woman behind the wheel."

"Could there have been anybody in the back seat?"

"What back seat? It was a coupe."

"Oh," Rick said.

He took a few tentative steps. The thigh wasn't bad, except that it forced him to limp a little.

"Think you can make it?"

"It's only a bruise. Thanks a lot."

"That's all right," the man said. "Those women drivers!"

A TAXI cruised by and Rick hailed it and took it downtown to his hotel. He paused in front of his room door to fumble in his pockets for the key. When he inserted it, the lock didn't act right. He turned the knob and the door opened.

The light was on in the room. A woman he had never seen before rose from a chair.

Rick felt himself go tense. He remained in the doorway, keeping the door open behind him.

The woman laughed. "You needn't stare at me like that. Finding a woman in your room after midnight might have a French farce touch, but at my age I'm hardly the seductive type."

Hardly. She was close to sixty, if not over, but extremely well-preserved in a raw-boned way. She wore her gray hair mannishly short, and under her swagger coat she wore a mannish gabardine suit.

But age or youth didn't interest Rick at the moment. She was a female, waiting in his room at an ungodly hour, and a female was out to kill him.

He kept his eyes on her as he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. Her hands were empty, but there were deep pockets in her loose coat. Her handbag lay closed on the table.

"Who let you in?" Rick asked.

"I found the door unlocked."

He looked back at the snap-lock. "I remember having had to turn the catch when I left. It would have snapped back."

"Don't be so infernally suspicious," the woman said. "If I had picked the lock or something, would I have come in and left the catch open?"

"You might. If you were caught in here, it would be convenient to pretend that the door was unlocked."

She reached into her handbag. Rick tensed again, but she only pulled out a pack of cigarettes. Calmly she lit one. "I suppose under the circumstances I shouldn't expect courtesy."

"Sorry," Rick said. "I'm peeved and I'm on edge. I've just seen a girl die with a bullet in her heart. She was shot on Central Park West and Eighty-First Street."

The cigarette became stationary inches from the woman's lips. Her hand was trembling, but Rick supposed the hands of women that age were never steady. There was no other reaction. The cigarette moved on to her mouth.

"Somebody you knew?" she asked.

"Not before tonight."

She shrugged. "For a moment I forgot that you're a reporter and that's your job. I suppose you're used to violent death. Susan Train was telling me all about you the other night."

"You know Aunt Susan?"

"Intimately. I live in Westchester, near Croton. I see your aunt often. She sincerely believes that you are the best reporter in New York, the best pistol shot in the world, and the most devoted nephew a woman ever had."

Rick grinned. "That's Aunt Susan, all right."

"She is a very sweet person. Oh, but I haven't introduced myself. You're Richard Train, I know. I'm Brenda File. You may have heard your Aunt Susan speak of me."

"Probably. Your name is very familiar, Mrs. File."

"*Miss* File. I wasn't the seductive type even in my youth." She expelled smoke through her nostrils with the nonchalance of a young girl. "I dropped in to invite you for the weekend."

"At this hour?" he said.

"Suspicious again. Oh, you reporters! You wouldn't trust your own mothers. I happened to be passing the hotel and I do things on the spur of the moment. Please come."

"I'm sorry, but I——"

"Oh, I know I have no attraction for a young man," Miss File broke in serenely. "But I have a niece—Deborah. We live alone together in our snug little cottage. I'm sure you two will get along."

SO IT was one of those things! Rick was hardened to mothers who conspired to throw him together with marriageable daughters. This time it was an aunt and niece, but it came to the same thing. And the aunt was a mannish-looking whack who paid social calls at three in the morning.

But that open lock—funny!

"I'd like to accept," Rick lied shamelessly, "but I'm to be put into Army uniform in six days."

"I know. Your aunt told me. If you would only come out tomorrow for Saturday and Sunday—that is, this afternoon. It's Saturday already, isn't it? I'm driving up first thing in the morning, with my last drop of gas, so you could come with me."

"Sorry," Rick said. "All my remaining minutes are taken."

Her shoulders drooped. She looked as tired and as old as her years. The niece must be pretty bad if Aunty had to try so hard.

"Perhaps some other time," she said, smiling wanly. "Say, after the war."

Rick muttered further apologies. She started for the door.

"Your bag, Miss File," he said.

She turned with her hand on the knob. Rick swept the handbag off the table, but he did not give it to her. He weighed it in his hand.

Rick leaped frantically to one side

"Pretty heavy," he said.

Miss File looked at him through a cloud of smoke. The cigarette bobbed in the corner of her mouth, man fashion.

"A handbag is a woman's only pocket," she said. "May I have it?"

Ignoring her outstretched hand, he opened her bag and took out a gun. It was a popular model Colt automatic—a short-nosed blue .32 with a checked walnut stock. The girl had been shot by a .32 caliber pistol, but probably not this kind.

"I have a permit to carry it," Miss File said coldly. "I'm nervous about living in an out-of-the-way place with only my niece and a maid in the house." Her nostrils flared; he had at last got under her skin. "Anyway, I don't see that it's any of your business."

Rick said, "Sorry," and replaced the gun and handed the bag to her. She

snatched it out of his hand.

"Good night, Miss File."

Without a word she slammed the door.

Moments later the door opened again. Her head reappeared. The anger was wiped from her face.

"If you change your mind by tomorrow, Mr. Train, give me a ring. I'm on the Croton exchange."

"Thanks," Rick said.

This time the door closed softly. Rick stood frowning at it. Then he snapped the catch shut.

AT ELEVEN A. M. Sergeant Midge's knock awakened Rick.

"The Nemesis of slumber," Rick growled as he admitted him. "Don't you cops ever sleep?"

"Not when somebody is thoughtless enough to get shot in my district." The sergeant's voice and eyes were sleepy, but then they always were. "The slug taken out of the girl's heart matches the shell found in front of the kiosk across the street. The gun's an Alkar."

"Spanish," Rick said. "Common enough, though not in this country. You'll find one in my trunk in my aunt's house. If my Alkar murdered the girl, it would hardly be back in the trunk."

"That's something we'll have to see. Maybe the gun's not there any more. Maybe it's stolen or——"

"Or I killed her with it after all," Rick said.

Midge gave his thin-shouldered shrug. "Could be, and the girl made a mistake. She couldn't see who killed her; she only assumed it was a certain woman she was afraid of. But we could talk all day about possibilities. I'm after facts. Write out a note to your aunt that it's all right for one of my men to see your guns and take one with him."

"Is that an order?"

Midge sighed. "Don't act up, Rick. I can go to the courts and get a look at the trunk."

"I guess so." Rick went to his desk and opened his portable typewriter.

"What happened to you?" Midge asked. "You weren't limping a few hours ago in the hospital."

"This?" Rick rubbed his thigh through his trouser leg. "Our mysterious female isn't as good with a car as with a gun. The first time she missed me completely. The best she could do the second time was to nick me with a fender."

"When was this?"

"When I came out of the hospital." Rick told him about it.

Midge wet his lips. "Because she can shoot straight, it doesn't mean she'll use a gun every time. You said that was the second time. When was the first?"

"Last night after I put the girl into the cab."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because it didn't mean anything to me then," Rick said. "Not till I was almost run down the second time in one night and had heard the girl's warning about a woman. And it was a coupe both times, and there was a woman in that first coupe also. Then I started remembering. When the girl and I left the *Courier-Express* building, I noticed a coupe turn the corner. Possibly it wasn't the same car, but I'll give odds that it was."

MIDGE rolled his hat into a ragged cylinder. "It figures. The unknown woman followed the girl. She saw her go into the newspaper building with the girl and later saw her come out with you. She was sure that the girl had told you whatever it was that made it necessary that you both be liqui-

dated. She made the first try at you, missed, then rushed uptown. She knew where the girl was getting out of the hack and was waiting for her, with the car parked not far away. Then she hung around the hospital, and when she saw you come out she tried again.

"Why wouldn't she have used her gun on me?" Rick said. "With her marksmanship, it would have been a cinch."

"The idea was to make you take the rap for the other killing. Evidently she knows you, or knows who you are. She used a foreign make gun because you're known to collect them. Then if you were killed by a hit-and-run driver, the case would be closed."

Rick wasn't satisfied. "How did she know I hadn't written the story up already? And after you took me to the hospital, chances were I'd have told you what the girl told me. The killer is after me only because she thinks I know."

"There's that," Midge agreed. "Maybe for some reason it's important only that you don't remain a live witness. There are lots of answers we don't know yet."

Rick inserted paper into the portable. He typed: *Dear Aunt Susan.* Then he stared at the paper, thinking of Miss Brenda File and her strange visit and the gun in her handbag. But that gun was a Colt and the girl had been shot with an Alkar. So far, there wasn't anything at all that tied Miss File to the murder.

He finished the letter and gave it to Sergeant Midge. Then he said: "How about a drink?"

"Too early." Midge unrolled his hat and stuck its shapeless form on his head. "That lass might have other tricks up her sleeve. And she'll be in a hurry. She won't be able to follow you into the Army."

"You're a cheerful guy," Rick said.

"Realistic," Midge said.

WHEN the sergeant was gone, Rick put in a call to his Aunt Susan. He told her about the man who would come with a letter to look at his gun collection. Then he said: "I met a close friend of yours. Miss Brenda File."

"Brenda File?" Aunt Susan sounded puzzled. "Oh, yes, I met her at a bridge at Marge Raleigh's Wednesday evening. But you could hardly call her a friend. I saw her only that evening and I doubt if we exchanged a dozen words. She was playing at another table."

"Did you talk to her about me?"

"In a dozen words, darling?" Aunt Susan said. "Let me think. Yes, I remember I did say something about you, but not to her. I was telling the women at my table how you solved so many murders after the police gave up."

"Aunt Susan, I wish you wouldn't go around——"

"Well, it's true, isn't it?"

"I was lucky a couple of times," Rick said. "What else did you say?"

"I hardly remember. I think I mentioned that you work for the *Courier-Express* and that you will be in the Army where your marvelous marksmanship will probably get you a high commission and that——"

"I don't know about that commission yet."

"You'll get it," Aunt Susan assured him.

"Could Brenda File hear you?"

"I imagine so. She was at the next table. I made no secret of what I was saying, darling. Is it important?"

"I was curious to know how she knew so much about me."

He said good-bye and hung up. Then he called the hotel desk and learned that nobody had inquired for

him during the night, in person or by phone.

Slowly Rick stripped off his pajamas. The roof of his mouth was dry. He seldom drank before breakfast, but he needed a drink now. He took the bottle of bourbon out of the cabinet and poured himself a full two-ounce glass.

The glass touched his lips. He rolled a little of the whiskey on his tongue, savouring it, and realized that that early in the morning he had no taste for bourbon. Or was there something wrong with it?

He stood looking at the glass in his hand, thinking of a gray-haired mannish woman who had lied about finding his door unlocked and about being a close friend of his aunt and who perhaps hadn't stopped at the desk because she hadn't wanted to be seen going up to his room.

Carefully he poured the contents of the glass back into the bottle, and spat out the mouthful.

When he had shaved and dressed, he took his Smith & Wesson magnum from his valise. It was too heavy and the barrel was too long, but it was the only gun at hand. He dropped it into his pocket.

CHAPTER IV

Sabina Felice

IN THE hotel lobby a number of fellow newspapermen and women crowded around one of the ornate pillars. Rick recognized the symptoms: they had received word that a celebrity was arriving at the hotel and had laid in wait.

Lanning of the *News* said to the pillar: "You say you never saw Anselm File, Miss Felice?"

Rick had almost skirted the crowd. Now he stopped short, shifting the bottle of bourbon wrapped in a newspaper under his arm.

"Not that I remember," a woman's voice replied. "You see, I was only an infant when he abandoned my mother."

Rick joined the reporters. Several of them nodded to him without getting excited, which meant that for his own reason Captain Connell had kept his connection with the murdered girl under his hat.

The object of the interview was a lush redhead of about thirty. She wore slacks, a sport coat, sunglasses, and she could have been considered good-looking if one liked them meaty. Her get-up indicated a movie actress, probably a very minor one.

"How come you don't use your father's name, Miss Felice?" she was asked.

"I changed it for professional reasons. The names are similar though, aren't they? File—Felice."

"Did your mother ever talk about your father?"

"Very little. She kept her tragedy locked inside her." The redhead touched her nose with a lace handkerchief. "Poor mother! She died of a broken heart when I was eight."

"Didn't she wait rather long for her heart to break?" That was Hal Zeller.

She gave him a dirty look. "You may be flippant about this, but I cannot be." The handkerchief went to her face again. "Poor mother! What she suffered from that man!"

She was an actress all right, Rick decided. He edged over to Hal's side.

Hal said: "Hello, Rick." Then to the redhead: "But you'll take his money, Miss Felice."

"I should say I will." She drew herself up. "Don't I deserve it after what he did to me and Mother?"

A girl reporter Rick didn't know asked: "Anselm File died six weeks ago.

Why did you wait so long to claim his money?"

"Because I read about it only last week in a Florida paper. That's where I've been staying, Palm City, Florida, until a suitable part opened for me on Broadway. I came north as soon as I could. Oh, yes! No doubt you are interested in proof of my true identity. These are photostatic copies of letters my father wrote me recently. The originals, of course, are in the hands of my lawyer."

SHE opened a manila envelope and distributed neatly clipped batches of black and white sheets of paper. Hal Zeller moved to the crush around her and took one and returned to Rick, reading the top sheet.

"Who's she?" Rick asked.

"Sabina Felice. Claims to be Anselm File's long-lost daughter."

"Is this Anselm File related to Brenda File of Westchester County?"

"She's his sister," Hal said. "She's the one who expected to come into Anselm's dough, along with a niece, if the daughter wasn't found. Hell, Rick, it's been on all page threes for a month."

That, Rick realized, was why Brenda File's name had sounded familiar to him. He said: "You know I never read any stories but the ones I write and the war news. Let's have the low-down. I met Brenda File the other day."

The interview was over and the cameramen were getting to work. One of them got a chair for her and she was arranged in a pose that showed plenty of leg. It was a well-filled leg.

Hal Zeller led Rick toward the bar. On the way they passed Joe Barr, a private detective, seated on one of the couches with a very pretty girl.

"Know Anselm File's niece too?" Hal asked in a casual tone.

"No."

Hal nodded toward the girl with Joe Barr. "That's her. Deborah File, who was supposed to split the dough with her aunt. Now she won't. She doesn't look happy about it.

She was leaning forward from her hips, her hands clasped tightly on her crossed knee, her eyes fixed angrily on the lush redhead. Joe Barr was speaking animatedly to her, but she didn't appear to be listening.

"Nice looking," Hal observed as they passed into the bar. "She was close to being rich as well as beautiful. She kept insisting there wasn't any daughter, and most of us agreed with her. Till now."

They sat down at the bar. Rick placed his bundle at his feet. Not having had breakfast yet, he ordered coffee.

"Give me everything you know, Hal," he said. "Start from the beginning."

"It goes back too far," Hal said. "Back to the beginning of the century in the southwest oil fields. This Amselm File was just a desert rat when he and his pal, Reuben Jones, struck it rich. Very rich. Millions of dollars worth. Unlike most of his kind, he didn't drink it away or gamble it away or throw it away on women. Reuben Jones did. Anselm sank the dough into gilt-edged securities and after a while came east to New York where he built himself an ugly stone house in Putnam County, near the Westchester line.

"In spite of his money, he didn't go in for the jolly life. He was the bitterest man who ever lived. Practically no friends, no neighbors he would have anything to do with, certainly no women. Didn't even have a servant in his place, though he could have afforded a dozen. Oh, yes, this Reuben Jones,

now practically broke, put up a shack in the vicinity. Probably sponged on Anselm. And Anselm's unmarried sister and niece lived not far away. Now and then they felt sorry enough for him to visit him, but I understand he hardly encouraged them."

"Charming guy," Rick said.

HAL drank deeply of his highball. "Something must have happened to him to put so much hate in what was left of his soul. Every poem he wrote was filled with raw hate, and he wrote thousands."

"Poet?" Rick said. "Never read a line of his."

"Few people did. The magazines wouldn't touch his stuff. Not because he was an unappreciated genius. He was just plain lousy. But he had the dough to get his junk printed privately, so at least the typesetter and the proofreader read it beside himself. The critics didn't. Nobody did. He was splendidly ignored. Until he up and died, and a couplet he'd written made him famous."

Hal wiped his mouth with the back of a hairy hand. "When his will was read, it was found to consist of a couplet and nothing else. It went something like this:

" 'Blood, in the end, I find thicker than water,
I bequeath every cent I possess to my daughter.'

"That's the kind of poet he was, and that's the kind of man. Not a word of explanation. It was the first anybody suspected old Anselm was human enough to have an offspring. Reuben Jones, his old buddy, thought he'd been married long ago in Texas just after he'd struck it rich and possibly there might have been a baby, but he wasn't sure. Anyway, the papers, which you don't read, went to town trying to find the heiress."

"Is the will legal?" Rick asked.

"It seems so. It was all in order, witnessed by his lawyer and Reuben Jones. Brenda and Deborah File are contesting it, of course. It means a couple of million bucks to them, less taxes. They claim that old Anselm was cracked and that he never had a daughter and consequently, since they're his only living relatives, they're entitled to his dough. And then today Sabina Felice barged in, making sure that the press will be here to meet her and well-supplied with photostatic evidence."

"What's her background?"

"She says she came from Texas where her mother died when she was eight. Pretends to be a dramatic actress vacationing in Florida. Actually the dope is that she's a burlesque showgirl on her uppers. That figure of hers was made for a G-string. That doesn't mean, of course, that she can't be Anselm's daughter."

"How do the photostats look?"

HAL spread them on the bar and together they looked through them. There were copies of five letters written to her by Anselm File within a period of two months before his death. Bull, long-winded stuff telling Sabina that he was sorry about the way he had treated her, because, after all, it was unfair to hold her responsible for her mother.

"That explains his bitterness," Hal Zeller said. "His wife must have played him dirty."

Rick nodded and read on. Every one of the letters mentioned money he was enclosing. But he didn't want to see her. He wrote again and again that he was afraid that she might remind him too much of her mother, and he had

spent years trying to forget her.

"They look all right," Hal said. "But that's up to the courts to decide." He swung off the stool. "Have to make the one-twenty deadline with this story. You're lucky, Nick. Not a thing on your mind any more."

Rick wished that people would stop telling him how lucky he was.

He had another cup of coffee and then returned to the lobby. Sabina Felice was gone and so were the reporters. But Joe Barr and Deborah File were still occupying the couch, speaking in whispers. She broke off in the middle of a sentence when Rick limped over.

"Hello, Joe," Rick said.

Joe Barr rose and stuck out a hand. Rick transferred his newspaper-wrapped bundle to his left arm and shook. His bones cracked under the pressure of Barr's fingers.

Joe Barr didn't look like a power-grip boy. His features were as sleekly cut as a movie juvenile's, except for his nose which was slightly askew. His body was as solid on top and as slender from the waist down as a middleweight boxer's. As a matter of fact, Barr had been a fairly successful fighter for a year or two. He had been a lot of other things, and at present was a lone-wolf private detective. Most of his clients were lovelorn women who delighted in giving him their confidences.

"Thought you'd be in uniform by now, Ricky," Joe Barr said. "The word is that they copped you."

"In a few days." Rick couldn't resist a dig. "I see that you manage to keep from being copped."

Joe Barr laughed the soft intimate laugh that made matrons melt. "I may look like a man, but I'm only part of one. My kidney is haywire. Well, be seeing you." He resumed his seat beside the girl.

Rick maintained his position in front of the couch. He said to the girl: "Aren't you Deborah File? I know your aunt."

SHE looked up at him. Her eyes were very large and the color of rich cocoa. It would be easy to drown in them. Her tanned face was a perfect oval. A week-end, Rick thought, could be spent very pleasantly with her.

"I don't think I ever met you," she said.

Joe Barr bounced to his feet again. "I'm always over looking the social amenities. Debby—Rick Train, the demon crime news hawk. Or he was."

She stretched a hand up to Rick. It felt very cool. Rick wondered why Joe Barr hadn't wanted to introduce them until he had been forced to. Perhaps Barr liked to keep his women to himself. Perhaps something else.

Rick said conversationally: "You didn't seem happy to see your cousin."

"Cousin!" The anger he had seen in her face when she had been watching Sabina Felice returned in a flood. "She's no more my cousin than you are."

"In other words," Joe Barr said lightly, "Sabina Felice is a genuine dyed-in-the-wool phony."

"Those letters look like the real thing," Rick said. "Did you see them?"

Deborah File sat forward. "Not yet. What's in them?"

Rick told her.

"How were they addressed?" Barr wanted to know.

"There weren't any photostats of envelopes. Chances are that she threw the envelopes away as she received the letters, the way people nearly always do. But once or twice Anselm File mentioned the place where she was staying at the time.

Palm City—a town in Florida."

"Never heard of it."

"It's a motheaten inland resort town, southwest of Jacksonville," Rick said. "I was there once. The county sheriff, Don Holt, is a friend of mine."

"That doesn't prove the letters aren't forged," Barr said.

"I wouldn't bet on it," Rick said. "Sabina's name wasn't mentioned in any of the letters. The salutation reads only: 'Dear Daughter.' If they were forged, Sabina would have been sure to strew her name through the letters."

"That shows how clever she is!" Deborah File exclaimed.

Rick was surprised at the vehemence of her tone and expression; he hadn't thought her capable of it. After all, though, it meant a lot of money to her if Sabina Felice was shown to be a fraud.

Barr said casually: "She looks dumb enough to think she can put across a forgery on an estate that size. Those letters will be studied by half the experts in the country. And every bit of her background will be gone into. How about some lunch, Debby?"

She stood up, and she was tall. Rick preferred girls he did not have to look down at. She gave him a parting smile—the first time Rick had seen her smile, and it was something to see. Then she tucked her hand intimately through Joe Barr's arm and walked off with him.

Rick left almost at their heels. He saw them head east, and as he stood watching them, he wished suddenly that he were taking her to lunch.

HE RODE downtown in the subway to Chambers Street and walked the rest of the way to a sporting arms store. The manager knew him well and insisting on showing Rick his current supply of pistols and revolvers. When Rick left, he was wearing a holster under his left shoulder, and his revolver was in it.

His next step was West Seventeenth Street. He went up to the first floor of a shoddy building and entered a glazed door which bore the information: "HERBERT WINDRO, CHEMICAL ANALYSIS." A young man in white smock and rimless glasses came into the tiny outer office.

Rick unwrapped the bottle from the newspaper and handed it to Windro. "Give it the works, Herb."

"It's a shame," Windro said. "Good bourbon."

"Maybe not so good."

Windro grinned. "Don't tell me it's evidence the police are after. Last time, you had me in hot water."

"All right, so I'm not telling you," Rick said. "I'll be back in an hour."

He walked, still limping, until he came to a restaurant he knew served good food. While he was eating, a woman came down between the tables with a coat over her arm. She stopped two tables away and looked at him. Rick put his hands on the sides of the chair, meeting her eyes. He had never seen her before, but he had never seen the woman who had murdered the girl. At least, he didn't know if he had.

An eternal moment passed before the woman turned her back to him and hung her coat on a hook. All she had in the hand beneath the coat was her bag. Rick eased back in his chair, feeling foolish. For the first time he admitted to himself that he was scared.

When he returned to the laboratory, Herbert Windro came into the outer office beaming happily.

"Cyanide of potassium," Windro announced.

Rick touched his lips with his tongue as if something burned him there, though he felt nothing. At about two this morning he and Sergeant Midge had taken drinks out of that bottle. And after that Miss Brenda File had been alone in his room.

"Much?" Rick asked.

"At least two grams."

"What would a two-ounce glass from that bottle do to anybody who drank it?"

Windro laughed as if at something funny. "There were nineteen ounces left in the bottle. In round figures, a two-ounce glass would contain at least two-two-tenths of a gram. One-tenth of a gram of cyanide of potassium will deliver the average mortal into immortality. Nobody drank the stuff, did they?"

"Not quite," Rick said.

CHAPTER V

Too Many Guns

RICK used up his remaining gas ration coupons to fill the tank of his convertible and then headed north up the Express Highway. An hour and a half later he found himself lost somewhere below Peekskill.

Not lost, strictly speaking, for he knew where he was, but he had only a general idea of his destination. And he passed no public phone where he could stop to call Miss Brenda File for directions. Trying to return to Route 9, he got himself caught in a narrow dirt road which stolidly led nowhere. And then even that way was blocked by a gleaming sedan parked in the middle of the road.

The rear left tire of the sedan was flat; a squat, dark-haired man was down on his knees struggling with a jack. An attractive girl, with hair as dark as his, was watching him without interest.

Rick honked his horn.

The man growled without turning: "Keep your pants on, sport. What d'you want me to do?"

"Move your car a couple of feet and let me by."

"And ruin a good tire? You wait or turn around."

"There's no room to turn," Rick pointed out.

The man did not answer. He gave the jack a few turns, and it slipped on the dirt base.

Rick felt his temper rise. His recent experiences had set his nerves on edge. He pushed the door open and poked his head out.

"A few feet won't hurt your tire," he said. "You can't block the road like this."

The squat man stood up and turned. He was breathing heavily; his broad, swarthy face glistened with sweat. In spite of the fact that he was over-heated and doing messy work, he had not removed his too tight jacket or even unbuttoned it.

"You want to make something of it, sport?" he said nastily.

This time it was Rick who did not answer. He had recognized Eddie Mix, and Eddie Mix was not a lad to start up with simply because one was annoyed. The New York police considered him one of the worst of the local bad men, equally handy with gun or knife and easily provoked to use either.

In the last eighteen hours there had been three attempts on Rick's life. He was not eager for a fourth.

EDDIE MIX returned to his labor. Through the windshield Rick watched him push the jack under the axle and try again. It skidded over on its side. Eddie Mix, with the girl standing there, expressed himself loudly and

vigorously in language as foul as Rick had ever heard. The girl did not turn a hair.

Rick had never seen her before. Looking at her, he wondered, as he often had in the past, how heels like Eddie Mix managed to get themselves such good-looking women. She wore a sleazy, tightly belted dress designed and worn to set off her curves, of which there were plenty. Exotic was the word for her, with her black hair drawn back from a smooth, olive brow and her features dynamic rather than pretty. Mexican or Spanish, probably.

She must have said something to Eddie Mix which Rick hadn't heard, for suddenly the gangster twisted on his knees and swore up at her. She bared gleaming teeth and tossed words almost as virile as his own back at him.

Rick didn't know what they were arguing about and didn't care. Eddie Mix or not, he'd be damned if he'd park there all afternoon. He honked his horn again.

Eddie Mix started to turn to him, finding a second person on whom to take out his rage at the jack. But the girl wasn't finished. She said something to Mix between her teeth, and whatever the word was, it was like setting off a charge of dynamite.

Eddie Mix went berserk. He swung back at her and raised his hand. Rick found himself thinking that it was lucky that Mix hadn't the jack handle in his hand, for he would have brained her. The gangster's temper was notorious. Then Mix's palm slashed across the girl's cheek.

It wasn't a slap. It was a power blow that almost tore off her head. She slammed against the back of the sedan and went down. Her tight skirt hiked up to her hips, showing a glimpse of sleek olive skin.

Rick left his car. He had almost reached Mix when Mix drew back his leg and kicked at her. She rolled out of the way in time to save herself a broken bone.

Then Rick's hand was on Eddie Mix's shoulder. He spun his around.

"What the hell's the idea?" Rick said.

Mix's face was a study in sheer fury. He drove a powerhouse right to Rick's jaw, but he was off balance. Rick took it over his shoulder and crossed with his own right to the button. Mix went back on his heels.

The girl shrieked harshly. Out of the corner of his eyes Rick glimpsed the girl scramble to her feet. Mix wasn't coming back for more. He leaned against the car, panting, his face dark and sweating, and suddenly his right hand crossed his chest.

"No!" Rick barked.

EDDIE MIX'S hand froze inside his jacket. His dark, flaming eyes were fixed in astonishment on the revolver in Rick's hand. He seemed to have trouble believing that anybody could get a gun out before he did.

The girl shrieked again and threw herself at Rick. He pushed her off with his left hand, hard.

"Tell her to behave, Eddie," Rick said. "I don't want her to make me shoot you."

"Lay off, Camilla," Mix said.

His voice had changed. There was no longer any rage in it. Each word was as cold as a falling icicle, and his eyes were suddenly cold too. And Rick knew that a fury now possessed Eddie Mix beyond anything he had felt before.

"Your gun, Eddie," Rick said. "And no funny work. I can shoot very straight and fast."

Mix stood very still, looking at him. He nodded once. "I got you spotted, sport. You're that newspaper guy, that Rick Train. They say you're pretty

handy with a rod and your mitts."

"Very handy," Rick said. "Toss your gun at my feet."

Slowly Mix's hand went inside his jacket and came out with a .45 automatic.

"Shoot him, Eddie!" Camilla shrilled.

Mix smiled tenously. "She don't understand that a guy should pick his spots. Ain't that so, sport?"

He tossed the gun. Rick picked it up and emptied the chamber of bullets and threw the pistol to the side of the road.

"The love of a woman is a thing of wonder," Rick said. "That's all the thanks I get for saving you from getting mangled."

Camilla showed perfect teeth. "I can fight my own battles."

"I hope so," Rick said. "Now give me room to pass, Eddie."

Mix got into his car and started the motor and pulled over. Camilla remained on the road. When Rick passed her in his convertible, she spat at the door. Rick grinned at her.

Then he was level with Eddie Mix who sat behind the wheel of his sedan. Mix looked across at Rick, all of his face frozen.

"From now on I'd keep that rod of yours handy," Mix said quietly. "I don't forget."

"Thanks for the tip," Rick said.

When he had gone a hundred feet farther, Rick saw through his mirror that Eddie Mix had gotten out of the sedan and was picking up his heavy automatic from the road.

THE garrulous kid who drove the delivery truck Rick stopped in Montrose knew all the Files there were to know—except the daughter, he said, if there was one. He worked for the Peekskill food market and used to make a delivery to Anselm File in Putnam about once every ten days. A very small order it would be, hardly enough for one man; and the old man would count out the money in small change from a worn purse and never think of a tip. Miss File and that honey of a niece of hers, on the other hand, ate and tipped lavishly. He hoped the courts would give them the old buzzard's dough.

His directions were so detailed that Rick lost his way only twice more before he rolled up the short driveway of a charming frame two-story cottage. It wasn't a big house and there wasn't more than an acre of ground. The place of people not badly off, but hardly rich.

He pulled up to the single-car garage at the rear of the house. The garage doors were open. He went in and saw that the File car was a coupe. For a long minute he studied it, but that was no help. He hadn't got a good look at the coupe which twice had almost run over him.

A gun exploded practically in Rick's ear.

Rick's revolver leaped into his hand. He stood against the side of the coupe, waiting. There were five more shots, slowly spaced. Then a girl laughed merrily.

Rick moved out of the garage and across the front of his convertible and around the corner of the cottage. Standing in front of a petunia bed in the back yard, Deborah File was sticking cartridges into the cylinder of a big revolver. She had changed to slacks and a thin sweater, and the sun danced in her wild curls.

A wizened old man, with a face as wrinkled as a dried prune, stood at her side. His clothes didn't match his face or body. His light-gray slacks had a razor-edged crease; he wore a close-fitting sports jacket over a blazing polo shirt.

Their backs were to Rick. He stayed

where he was. Deborah pushed the broken revolver together and extended her arm. It was a heavy gun and much too big for her hand—an ancient Colt six-shooter, a .45 or maybe a .44.

Rick noticed then the three small cans about fifty feet away. Deborah shot at them. She was good. Out of six bullets, two hit one can and one another can.

Watching her, Rick told himself that he was coming into contact, directly or indirectly, with quite a few females who either knew how to handle guns or who carried them in their handbags.

"Nice shootin', Debby," the old man said. "It ain't near as easy as it looks."

Deborah reloaded the revolver and handed it to the old man. He shot quicker than Deborah and with more success. He hit five cans out of six shots.

RICK acted on a sudden impulse. He put his own revolver against his right hip and walked forward, shooting as he moved, the shots coming so fast that they seemed to overlap. The girl and the old man whirled at the first shot and then back to the cans. Rick concentrated on one can, making it do a crazy dance until his gun was empty.

The old man whistled. "The prettiest hip-shootin' I ever seen. And walkin', and standin' back a lot farther than us."

Deborah was looking at Rick with a quizzical smile. Suddenly the gun embarrassed him.

"I'm sorry," Rick said. "I'm supposed to be one of the best there is, so it was a schoolboy stunt showing off like that."

Yet he was thinking that it might pay to show whatever woman was around that he had pretty dangerous teeth he could use in self-defense.

"Schoolboy!" the old man sniffed indignantly. "I seen some real shootin' in the old days out west, but that's as good as any. Nice gun you got there, Mister. I was teachin' Debby with my old .44."

Deborah hadn't taken her eyes off Rick's face, and that quizzical smile was glued to her lips.

"Did you follow me here, Mr. Train?" she asked.

"I might have thought of it, but I didn't have to. Your aunt invited me for the week-end."

Her smile turned into a frown. "Auntie didn't mention it to me. And you didn't either when you saw me. And I didn't know she knows you."

"We're old friends," he said.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Train," a cold voice said.

Miss Brenda File was standing on the little back porch. Like Deborah, she wore slacks and sweaters, and it made her rawboned figure look more mannish than ever. In her hand a cigarette smoldered. She did not look delighted at the sight of Rick.

"Sorry I was delayed," he said, walking over to her. "I meant to come early this morning, but I drank some bad whiskey."

Not a muscle in her face moved. Rick decided that she was a superb actress.

Coldly she looked down at him from the porch. "You said you weren't coming."

"You asked me to come if I changed my mind. Well, I changed it."

And she had changed hers, Rick thought. Or had that invitation been the first excuse that had occurred to her for being in his room?

MISS FILE wasn't making the conversation easy. It was up to her to say it. She was very busy with her cigarette. Rick took out his pipe and pouch and decided to wait her out. He was going to be thick-skinned; no matter what happened, he would spend the night here.

"Auntie, I don't understand" Deborah said. "You did invite Mr. Train, didn't you?"

Miss File realized she was trapped. She tried to get a little warmth into her voice, not very successfully. "I'm afraid your sudden appearance rather startled me, Mr. Train, after you said you weren't coming. You see, I didn't prepare enough food."

"But, Auntie, there's plent—" Deborah decided not to finish it. "Mr. Train, would you like a cocktail?"

"Call me Rick."

"All right, Rick." She put her hand lightly on his arm.

Rick liked that, but the uneasiness remained in him. He was a little afraid of this girl. As a matter of fact, he was afraid of all women, especially those who could shoot well or carried guns.

CHAPTER VI

Camilla Rogers

THE OLD MAN in the sleek, boyish clothes tagged after them into the cottage. He took up a position in front of the dead fireplace and with a hangdog expression watched Deborah shake cocktails.

Rick went over to him. "My name is Rick Train."

"I'm Jones." His palm was like cracked leather against Rick's.

"Reuben Jones?" Rick said.

Miss Brenda File turned away to mash out her cigarette in an ashtray. Deborah paused with the cocktail shaker shoulder high and said quickly: "I'm always forgetting to introduce people. Reuben is an old friend of the family."

And Joe Barr had forgotten to introduce Deborah in the hotel lobby, Rick thought. Didn't anybody want him to meet, or know the name of, anybody?

"You were once Anselm File's partner, weren't you?" Rick said.

"Sure. In the old days. But Anselm could hang onto his pile a lot better than me. I like to live while I'm livin'." He turned to Miss File. "Remember, Brenda, what a gay dog I was when I had what it costs?"

Miss File made an annoyed gesture with the corner of her mouth.

"What do you think of Sabina Felice?" Rick asked casually.

Miss File stiffened; Rick noticed it only because he was watching for a reaction. Deborah lined up four glasses on a table and started to pour the contents of the shaker.

"Sabina who?" Jones asked.

"Felice. Anselm File's daughter."

"Like hell she's his daughter!" Jones said. "Debby was tellin' me about her. She's a fake."

"Did Anselm have a daughter?"

Miss File said: "He did not! I'm Anselm's sister. I ought to know. He never in his life mentioned a daughter to me."

Reuben Jones scratched his cheek. "Well, Brenda, it's hard to tell. Anselm was always a quiet one, even in them days when he had money for the first time in his life. He was always pretty close-mouthed about his own doin's. And then we didn't see each other for years back there about 1913 and '20. And you, Brenda, didn't see him any more'n that till after he built his house near here. And he'd never talk about the old days."

"Then how," Rick said, "do you know Sabina Felice is a fraud?"

"I was Anselm's closest pal wasn't I? The only pal he ever had."

"But you just said—"

"If Reuben says that she is an imposter, then she is." Miss File's voice was harsh. "After all, we two are the only ones who can know."

"She had letters from her father," Rick persisted. "And she's probably got more in her background to prove it."

DEBORAH moved across to Rick with a cocktail in each hand. "The letters are forgeries. I told you that this morning in the hotel lobby."

"You haven't seen them, and even if you did, it would take an expert to decide."

Deborah looked him over gravely. "Why are you so interested? You no longer have even a reporter's interest."

"That's right, I guess it's none of my business." He raised his glass to Miss File. "I shouldn't be drinking, but I imagine what's in this glass isn't nearly as deadly as the bourbon."

It wasn't very subtle, but then he didn't intend it to be. Miss File's face didn't crack.

Deborah said: "This is the second time you spoke of some bad liquor you had. Was it at a party?"

"I left before it started. It would have been a doleful party."

"Well, you needn't be afraid of this rye. Reuben brought it."

After that, nobody seemed to have anything to say. Rick drifted over to a window and looked out at the dirt road as he sipped his drink. A woman was coming up the road. She limped slightly, and it struck Rick that he had forgotten his own limp. Most of the soreness was gone.

When the woman came closer, Rick recognized the dark, fiery Camilla. She was limping because her ridiculous high heels were not meant for walking over uneven dirt roads. Eddie Mix and his car were nowhere in sight.

She turned up the flagstone path to the cottage. Rick moved away from the window. Seconds later the doorbell rang and Deborah went out to answer it.

Rick heard their muttering voices at the front door. Deborah's voice rose once, sharply: "This is becoming downright comical."

"Who is it, Debby?" Miss File called.

The door closed. Deborah returned with Camilla.

Reuben Jones, who was trying to shake the last drops out of a cocktail shaker, lifted his head and gaped at the door. A couple of drops missed his glass and fell to the floor.

Deborah had a tight mirthless smile on her lips. "Auntie, this woman says she is Uncle Anselm's daughter."

"So you're Aunt Brenda?" Camilla breezed by Deborah to where Miss File stood. "I'm so happy to know you, Aunt Brenda. All these years I thought I was alone in the world. Now I have an aunt and a cousin."

"And a couple of million dallars," Miss File said dryly.

"Oh, that?" Camilla divided a broad beam between Miss File and Deborah. "Of course, it's nice. But it's not the most important. I mean, we're all one family. I don't think my father was leaving all the money to me. I think you two ought to have half."

Miss File said impassively: "At any rate, you are cleverer than Sabina Felice."

"Her!" Camilla spat out the word. "That crook! I read in the paper this afternoon about her claiming to be me. I'll have her thrown in the can, that's what I'll do."

"Hello, Camilla," Rick said.

SHE hadn't paid any attention to him leaning against the piano and stucking his pipe. She looked at him and a shadow crossed her fine black eyes. It was gone almost at once and her teeth reappeared.

He had thought that she would pretend not to know him, but she was smarter than that. "Hello," she said.

"Where's Eddie?" Rick asked.

"You mean the man I hired to drive me up here?" she said blandly. "I paid him off and he went back to the city."

Deborah said: "So you know her, Rick?"

"No. I met her for a few minutes an hour ago. She was with Eddie Mix, a mug and a killer. Eddie doesn't hire himself out—not to drive cars, anyway. He beat her up and she liked it, so I imagine she's his woman."

"You lie!" Camilla screeched. "Eddie's only——"

"Take it easy," Rick told her mildly. "Remember you're here to ooze sweetness and good-will. You're not greedy like Sabina Felice. You want to do right by your aunt and cousin. Besides, it will be easy to find out what you and Eddie Mix are to each other."

She regarded him suspiciously, then showed her back to him and faced Miss File. "All right, so I'm not a fine lady. I don't move in high society. What do you expect? My old man walked out on Mom when I wasn't even a year old. And when I was seven she died and there wasn't a person in the world who gave a damn about me. I didn't have it easy, though my old man was filthy rich. But get this. He left me his dough and it's mine no matter who I know or what I do."

"Leave this house," Miss File said.

"Huh?"

"I said, leave this house."

"Keep your shirt on," Camilla said. "I didn't come here to make trouble. Hell, if I was a crook like this Sabina Felice, I'd go to the papers first, wouldn't I? Well, I've told nobody. I came to see my aunt and cousin first—to talk reason to them. I'm not a hog; I don't want to leave my only two relatives out in the cold. There's plenty for all of us."

"Debby," Miss File said, "please phone the state police to send somebody to remove this hussy from my house."

"Hussy!" Camilla's voice hit a new high. "Who you calling a hussy, you old witch?"

Reuben Jones spoke for the first time since she had entered. He had been watching her, forgetting to empty his cocktail down his throat. "You say your name is Camilla?"

She swung toward him as if she had discovered a new enemy. "So what?"

"You got a second name, ain't you?"

"It's Rogers," she said. "Camilla Rogers. But don't be a wise guy and try to trap me. I know my name ought to be File, and it was until he ran out on Mom. Then she took her own name again and so did I. That was Garcia."

Jones nodded eagerly. "That's it—Garcia. And what was your mother's name?"

"Leta."

"Right! I knew her in those days. I'm Reuben Jones."

"Sure!" Camilla said. "I read about you when I read my old man died. And Mom used to speak about you. You'll tell these people I'm okay."

Miss File clasped her hands tightly in front of her. "What is this nonsense, Reuben? You said you had no knowledge of a wife or child."

"I said I wasn't sure. Maybe Anselm didn't marry this Leta Garcia."

"He did," Camilla said. "Look, I got it here, all legal."

SHE opened a handbag the size of a small valise and took out papers and thrust them into Jones' hand. Disdainfully Miss File remained where she was, but Rick and Deborah moved to either side of the old man.

"Yup!" Jones said. "That's the place—Dig Center, Texas. It shows here he married Leta Garcia March 12, 1912.

Ain't that so, Debby?"

"Well, it proves that he was married," Deborah conceded. "What are those other papers?"

"My birth certificate," Camilla said. "And some other stuff he left behind when he walked out on Mom."

"Well, you were born, all right," Reuben Jones chuckled. "Camilla File, right in Dig Center, February 24, 1913. Yeah, I recollect now there was a baby in the house when I used to visit Anselm."

"Reuben!" Miss File said sharply. "But you said there was no child."

"Well, now, I did, Brenda, but I figured it would be easier for you and Debby to get the money if I kept my mouth shut. Now these papers prove it, so it's no use keepin' quiet."

Deborah took the papers from his hand and she and Rick looked through them together. They were obviously old, yellowing and torn at the edges. In addition to the marriage license and birth certificate, there was a tax receipt for 1912 on a house in Dig Center made out to Anselm File, a twenty thousand dollar life insurance policy with Leta File the beneficiary, a number of business letters addressed to Anselm File at Dig Center.

"All these prove is that Uncle Anselm was married and lived for a while in a place called Dig Center and had a daughter," Deborah said. "But anybody could get hold of them. To me they are no more convincing than Sabina Felice's letters."

Reuben Jones clucked his tongue. "Now, Debby, I want you and Brenda to get the money, but I also want to do - hat's right. The minute this girl came in here I figured I'd seen her before. She's the spittin' image of Leta—the same color and thick black hair, and high spirit that made half the men in Texas crazy over her."

Deborah turned her grave gaze on Rick. "As a newspaperman, you must know something about these things. Rick, can she inherit on this evidence?"

"It'll have to go a lot further," Rick told her. "There will, of course, be a thorough investigation of every minute of her life. Those papers don't identify her, as you pointed out. There'll be a lot of questions. For instance, Camilla, you said your name is Rogers."

"That's what I've been calling myself," Camilla said. "I really had three names. First it was File, but I don't remember that. Then when my father left and sold the house over my mother's head and cancelled the insurance policy and didn't send her a cent, she called herself Garcia again, so I did too. Then the night Mom died I left home——"

"You mean somebody took you away?" Rick asked.

HER bright red mouth twisted. "Who was there to take me away? We knew nobody, hardly. Mom was ailing all the time, and the little money she got from men——" She looked about defiantly. "Yeah, men. She had no other way to support me and herself. But that wasn't much. We lived in a little shack a couple of miles outside of Dig Center and sometimes had hardly enough to eat. Then one night Mom was dead and there I was alone and no neighbors for three or four miles and none of them wanting to have anything to do with us anyway. So I took bits of clothes I had and other things and left."

"At the age of seven?"

"I was old enough to walk, wasn't I? Next day a man driving to San Antonio found me sleeping on the side of the road. He didn't know what to do with me, so he turned me over to an old widow named Rogers in San Antonio. She was mighty mean to me, working me like a slave, but I

had no place else to go. She made me take her name and that was all right with me, though I guess it isn't legal. I guess legally I'm Camilla File, a name I never used. I was fifteen when Mrs. Rogers died. From then on I've been strictly on my own."

There was a brief silence. They were all impressed by the detailed, straightforward way she told the story. But Miss File refused to show it.

"I see," Miss File said. "You can be traced back to Mrs. Rogers of San Antonio, who is dead, and probably the man who picked you up on the road is either dead or can't be found. In short, there's a wall around which we can't go. We can learn that Mrs. Rogers adopted a stray waif of seven. We can learn, perhaps, that Leta File died when her daughter was seven and the daughter vanished. But we can't prove that the daughter and you are not the same girl. Though, for that matter, you can't prove that you are."

"You still don't believe me?" Camilla said incredulously.

"I do not."

"Let me ask a question," Deborah put in. "Did you ever return to Dig Center after your mother died?"

"Why should I? She was dead and there was nothing there. I didn't know my father was alive either, till I read in the papers about him leaving that will. I knew his name, of course, so I put two and two together."

"So the night your mother died you took her marriage license and birth certificate and other papers with you?" Deborah persisted.

"Yes, everything."

Deborah's eyes snapped contemptuously. "Everything. You mean to tell me that a seven-year-old girl, frightened and alone and with her mother lying dead, would think to gather together a few bits of paper that she couldn't possibly understand?"

CAMILLA'S gaze shifted from one to the other of the two women—the slender, self-assured girl and the mannish, indomitable old woman, both of whom, it appeared, would fight to the bitter end to get their hands on Anselm's money. They stood on either side of Camilla as if hemming her in between them. Her eyes stopped at Reuben Jones, and she moved quickly to his side and grabbed his arm.

"Listen, mister, you knew Mom. Ask me questions. Ask me anything about her and Dig Center that only Mom's daughter could know."

Miss File said stiffly: "There'll be a time and place for that. Now get out."

The fire in Camilla flared. "You don't have to treat me like I was dirt. I'm as good as you are, Better, because soon I'll be rich. I came here with a fair and square offer. Why should I go through court fights with my own aunt and cousin? That's what I thought, anyway. I thought, there's enough for all of us. Let's split it, I thought, and we'll all be rich."

"Debby, I asked you a while ago to phone the police," Miss File said quietly.

Camilla threw harsh laughter into Miss File's face. "I'm going. You'd have to chain me to keep me in this dump another minute. To hell with you! I was going to act decent, but if you want it this way, okay. Now you won't get a red cent, that's what I'll show you!"

She stormed out. The cottage shook with the slamming of the front door. They could hear her high heels click indignantly across the porch and down the steps.

Reuben Jones put his drink down unfinished. "There are some questions ——" he muttered, and looked at Miss

File. Her face remained as stony as ever. He shrugged and left the house.

Nobody commented.

CHAPTER VII

The File Women

THE meal was not sprightly. Rick's attempts to make conversation proved a flop. Miss Brenda File presided at the head of the table with tight-lipped monosyllables. Deborah, opposite Rick, concentrated on her food, though she ate very little of it.

Plainly they were worried over the two claimants to Anselm's fortune. Though Rick was sure it didn't end there. It went deeper—even deeper than the inheritance of a million, or perhaps two million, dollars.

Halfway through the meal, Reuben Jones returned. He came in without ringing and stood in the dining-room doorway shifting his feet like an embarrassed schoolboy.

"I went after her," he said. "She asked me to ask her questions, and I figured maybe she wouldn't be able to answer 'em."

Miss File raised her head. "Well?"

"She knew all the answers. Or as many as you could expect."

"Have you had dinner, Reuben?" Miss File said.

"No, but——"

"Cynthia, bring in another service for Mr. Jones. He will eat with us."

"Wait, Brenda," Jones said. "Maybe you won't want me to eat at your table."

"Nonsense, Reuben. Sit down."

Jones drew up a chair to the foot of the table. He drummed his fingers nervously on the cloth while Cynthia, the dumpy maid, placed the soup before him. Presently he cleared his throat noisily.

"I asked her all about Dig Center," he said. "It ain't a big place—maybe two-three hundred people. Anyway, it was then, just before the first war. She knew all about it, things like they was when she was a mite. She told me about Leta—what she looked like, everything."

"Well?" Miss File demanded.

Jones examined his soup unhappily. "If I was you, I'd take her offer."

"Nonsense, Reuben."

Deborah pushed her plate away and asked quietly: "I suppose you'll testify in her favor, Reuben?"

"I don't know what to do," he said miserably. "I want you and Brenda should get the money. But if that girl's Anselm's daughter, she's entitled to it, ain't she? It ain't right that I should lie her out of her rightful money when the judge asks me. I told you you wouldn't want me here."

"Reuben, you're talking like a child," Miss File snapped. "By all means tell what you believe. It won't make any difference."

"Won't it?" Deborah leaned across the table toward Rick. "What do you think, Rick."

"I think his testimony will count for a great deal. After all, he was closest to Anselm at the time."

"But do you think she really *is* the daughter? She might be clever enough to have completely fooled Reuben."

"Now, Debby," Jones protested. "There are some things she couldn't fool me about."

Rick said: "There are a lot of things I don't like. One of them is Eddie Mix. If he's involved, there's bound to be something rotten. That doesn't mean too much, though. The way she explained it, she had the kind of life that would almost inevitably lead her into the arms of a mug like Eddie."

"What are the other things you

don't like?" Deborah urged.

RICK crushed a breadcrumb between his fingers. They were all looking at him, waiting. He glanced at Miss File's frozen features and then back to the breadcrumb.

"Just a feeling," he evaded the question. "And don't forget Anselm File's letters to his daughter which Sabina Felice has."

"Forgeries!"

Rick shrugged. "Frankly, I doubt it. Sabina Felice wouldn't be foolish enough to try to palm off anything that wouldn't pass the most searching tests."

Deborah's lips curled. "And no doubt this Sabina Felice has a background which can't be traced any farther than Camilla Rogers'."

"No doubt," Rick agreed.

Miss File snorted. "Why nag the subject. Both these girls are imposters, and we can let it go at that."

"You sound positive, Auntie."

"Of course I'm positive. Now let's pay attention to our food."

When the meal was over, Rick went out to his car for his bag. Cynthia was waiting for him at the back door with bed linen over her arm. He followed her into the hall.

Miss File was crouched over the telephone table near the foot of the staircase. Her back was toward Rick, and it was a taut arc as she held the handset to her ear.

"Listen," she said into the mouthpiece. "Wait. . . . Wait. . . . Listen to me."

She heard Rick and Cynthia behind her and threw a startled look over her shoulder and quickly hung up without saying good-by.

Her face changed. She looked, in those two or three seconds that she faced Rick, like a tired old woman. Her large bosom, prominent under the sweater, rose and fell. Then, abruptly, her face set again into its impassive mold.

"I'll show Mr. Train to his room, Cynthia," she said.

She took the linens from Cynthia and led the way up the stairs. The room was at the far end of the upstairs hall —as bare and impersonal as any guest room. Miss File pushed the door shut with her shoulder and turned to Rick.

"Mr. Train, I would be much happier if you did not spend the night here."

Rick grinned. "That's been obvious since I arrived. But I'm thick-skinned. I'm staying — unless, of course, you raise a row, and I don't think you will."

"Why did you come here?"

"You invited me."

The corners of her mouth twitched. Her self-control was not as firm as it had been. "You had no intention of coming when I asked you. You came here to snoop on us."

"That's funny," Rick said, "you accusing me of snooping, when I caught you in my room last night. At any rate, I haven't poisoned your whiskey."

"You said something about bad whiskey several times. I don't——" She searched his face. "What do you mean by that?"

"Don't you know?"

"I despise riddles."

"This one is easy," Rick said. "Between about two and three this morning somebody dropped a considerable dose of potassium cyanide into the bottle of bourbon in my cabinet."

Miss File closed her eyes a moment. "You think that I did it?"

"What am I supposed to think?"

"Oh, my God!" she said. "I didn't! I swear I didn't!"

RICK took the pipe out of his mouth and looked around for an ashtray.

There wasn't any in the room. "All right," he said. "Have you any idea who did?"

Her iron nerves were giving way. He could see it by what was again happening to her face. She was showing her age by the minute.

"Why would I know?" She dropped the linens on the bed. "I'll send Cynthia up to make up the bed." She started past Rick to the door.

"You no longer object to my staying?" he said.

"It seems I can't throw you out."

As she put her hand on the doorknob, he asked casually: "Who is Anselm File's daughter?"

Her hand rested motionless on the knob. "That's an absurd question. I had no reason to believe that a daughter existed. Now, I admit, I have been convinced that my brother had a daughter, but I don't know who she is or if she is still alive."

"You're positive, though, that the daughter is not Sabina Felice or Camilla Rogers."

"They strike me as being frauds."

"As simple as that?" Rick said. "Camilla especially was convincing. There's no reason why you should absolutely doubt her at this early stage. Yet you do. Is it because you know who the daughter really is?"

"Don't try to be clever with me, Mr. Train."

"Let's try this then: Who's the girl who was shot dead on Central Park West last night?"

Now the terror burst through her eyes. For a moment it looked out at him in stark nakedness, then receded behind a frozen film.

"What girl?" she asked, trying to sound indifferent.

"Didn't you read about it in the paper?"

"I didn't have a chance to look at a paper today." She yanked the door open and then hesitated. "Mr. Train, what business is this of yours? You're no longer a reporter. You're going into the Army in a few days."

"It was made my business," Rick said.

Her hand massaged the doorknob. "You can get out of it. You can report at the Army camp a few days earlier. You'll be safe there."

"I'm in this for keeps," Rick said. "At least for six more days. I don't approve of people trying to kill me."

She was outside in the hall and the door closed in his face so quickly that he blinked. It was as if she were running away from any further words. Was she afraid of what words might betray?"

He opened his bag and took out a box of .38 cartridges and reloaded five chambers of his revolver. He let the hammer rest on the empty chamber and stuck the gun back in his holster.

NOBODY but Cynthia, who was washing dishes in the kitchen, was downstairs.

"Where's Miss File?" Rick asked her.

"I guess you mean Miss Debby File," Cynthia said, smirking at a glimmering of romance. "She went out to the back yard a while ago, but she's not there any more."

Rick went through the rear door and stood on the tiny back porch. The sun had dropped behind the oaks and birches on his left, and on his right an orange three-quarter moon was barely over the rim of the horizon. The evening had a clean fresh twilight smell.

From the porch he could see a sedan parked behind his convertible in the driveway. It hadn't arrived during the meal which had ended more than thirty minutes ago. He looked back at the

copse of slender white birches which were trimmed so high that they leaned against the mild breeze. Something stirred there.

He descended the steps and cut around the vegetable patch which was going to seed. He was almost at the birch copse before he heard their low voices, and a few seconds later he saw them.

The trim shape in slacks and sweater and tousled curls was obviously Deborah. She was standing so close to the man that they merged into a single mass darker than the deepening twilight.

Rick was a few feet from them when they heard his approach. Swiftly Deborah drew back, the single shadow becoming two, and she stepped out from among the trees. Joe Barr, nonchalantly twirling his hat, came with her.

"Sorry," Rick said stiffly. "I didn't know I was breaking anything up."

The smooth-faced private detective laughed. "That goes two ways. I introduce you two this morning and now you're up here spending the week-end."

"Don't be silly, Joe," Deborah said. "I told you Auntie had invited Rick before I met him."

Barr put his hat on. "Sorry to run out on you folks so soon."

"But you just got here," Deborah protested.

"And I've got to get right back to town. I'd give a month's income for Ricky's break. Be seeing you, Debby. So long, Ricky."

Rick and Deborah stood side by side, not saying anything as they watched Barr saunter across the yard to his car.

"Does your aunt object to him?" Rick said as Barr backed the sedan out to the road.

SHE didn't answer at once. The shadows caught her tanned oval face just right. Rick's breath caught in his throat. All at once he understood why the picture of the two merged shadows was so distasteful to him.

"You mean because he didn't come into the house?" Deborah said. "I was outside when he arrived."

"Look," Rick said. "I've been told that a number of things aren't my business, and I didn't agree. This definitely isn't, though you're too nice not to know one thing. Joe Barr has a wife somewhere in Boston, and she's only one of his——"

Her eyes stopped him. They were darker than the twilight, but deep in them anger flamed.

"I'm sorry if you take it that way," Rick said. "I was just—— Oh, hell! There's no reason you shouldn't do whatever you want to do, but you ought to have your eyes open while you do it."

She opened her clenched right hand and raised it a little. For a moment he thought she was going to slap him. What she did was only a little less melodramatic. She spun on her heels and stalked toward the house.

Downing the impulse to run after her, he moodily loaded his pipe. He had succeeded in making himself extremely unpopular with the File women.

"High-spirited, ain't she?" a voice chuckled. "Brenda was like that in her young days. Matter of fact, Brenda still is."

Reuben Jones, his aged body in those boyish, glamorous clothes, stood at his side. Rick wondered what he was doing here. Probably spying on Deborah and Joe Barr.

Rick said: "Do you live near here?"

"I've a little place near Crompond Road. "I'm startin' home now."

"Walking?"

"Sure. It ain't more'n six or seven miles. Sometimes I get a hitch."

"You've got a hitch now," Rick told him. "I'll drive you."

"Well, thanks," Jones said. "My legs ain't what they used to be."

CHAPTER VIII

Anselm File

REUBEN JONES' home was as surprising as his clothes. The cedar-shingled cabin consisted of a sprawling living room, with a tricky kitchenette arrangement in an L, and a cubby-hole bathroom, all as neat and spotless as a Dutch kitchen and considerably more cozy. The furniture was good—men's furniture, heavy oak and leather in which one could relax.

"Thought an old bachelor's place would be a regular pigsty, eh?" Jones chuckled. "Well, I like things just so. Took my last few dollars and I had to borrow more from Anselm. Now Anselm's place, it's five times the size of this and you couldn't walk in for the dirt. He didn't care about nothin' at all, except maybe them poems of his. How about a fire? It's a mild night, but I can do with a bit of cheer."

There was more cheer than shortly blazed in the fireplace. Jones poured it out of a bottle. It was very good Scotch.

Rick settled back in the leather chair with a glass in one hand and his pipe in the other and his feet stretched toward the fire. He said lazily: "You know a lot more about Anselm's wife and daughter than you pretend."

"Not daughter," Jones said. "Ain't seen the daughter or heard about her since Anselm did, when the kid wasn't even a year old. Leta Garcia I saw lots of."

"You know Anselm and Leta were married."

"Sure I knew." Jones ran thumb and forefinger down the immaculate crease of one trouser leg. "But why should I tell? I like them two women, Brenda and Debby. Reason I bought this piece of land and built this cabin, I wanted to be near them. Had an idea once that maybe Brenda and me—well, never mind. Wanted to be near Anselm too. He was a strange bitter man these last twenty-thirty years. Didn't want nothin' to do with people; but him and me, we got along all right, and when I was short of cash, he'd lend me a bit now and then. Funny thing. He was tight these last few years, but it wasn't because he loved money. It was because there wasn't nothin' he wanted that money could buy. He didn't want good food or good things or good times. He wanted nothin' but to live with his bitterness."

"Getting back to Anselm's wife and daughter," Rick reminded him.

"Yeah. Well, I didn't know if the daughter was alive or if she'd ever been found, and I figured if I said there sure was a daughter they'd spend years and years lookin' for her, and Anselm's money would be layin' in the bank or wherever it is and Brenda and Debby wouldn't never get a cent. And they can use it. Brenda's got a little and she's been keepin' Debby since Anselm's only brother died and left her an orphan. But Brenda hasn't much and it's gettin' less all the time; so when Anselm's lawyer and then some reporters asked me about a daughter, I said it was so long ago I couldn't recollect. I was doin' what I thought was right."

"And now?" Rick said.

REUBEN JONES pondered over his drink. "What's right is right. Camilla, she's actin' pretty decent, offerin' to divide with Brenda and Debby. Why don't they do it?"

"You're sure she's the daughter?"

"Sure as I can be. I knew Leta Garcia as good nearly as Anselm himself. You seen Camilla this afternoon. She's pretty, ain't she? Not pretty as Debby, but the kind that makes you go hot and cold just lookin' at her. Well, her mother was like that, only more. All fire, if you know what I mean. Anselm had no business marryin' her. Not only because it was a come-down marryin' a Mex—anyway, that was the way we in Texas looked at it. He was too old—more'n forty already and she only about twenty. And he was a strange man even then. Read a lot of books and wrote poems and never even kissed a woman. When we struck it rich, I started to have fun. Anselm, he looked around for a woman to settle down and raise a family. And he fell for Leta Garcia, like a lot of other men around Dig Center did, only they had sense enough not marry her."

Reuben Jones paused to finish his drink and wipe his mouth with the back of a gnarled hand.

"I was there when it happened. Anselm had built Leta that big white house in Dig Center away from the messy oil fields, so he had to be away from home a lot. That time he got home a day or two sooner than he thought he would and I came back with him. It was late when we got there and the house was dark and the gang of Mex servants was asleep. I waited downstairs in the livin' room that was big as a big barn. Anselm went upstairs with his face all glowin' to say hello to his wife.

"Well, I didn't hear much. Just a sort of squeak up there, like it was made by a pretty big mouse instead of a woman, and then Anselm came down again. I went out to the hall, and Anselm, he went right by me like I wasn't there at all. He didn't see me; he didn't see anything. I said his name a couple of times, but he didn't hear either. I didn't go after him. I guess I was afraid, kind of, because of what was in his face.

"Then somebody was coming down the stairs. He didn't expect me there and stopped halfway down. He was a nice-lookin' kid I'd never seen before—Leta's age, maybe a few years more. I got it then, lookin' up at this boy and thinkin' that Anselm was over forty and never nothin' much to look at. I said to the boy: 'You better go out the back way and keep goin'. I don't want Anselm to have murder on his hands,' I said. The boy wet his lips and said: 'Has he got a gun?' I said: 'No, but he might be goin' to get one.' The boy was plenty scared because he didn't take the time to go to the back door. He went out through the nearest window and I heard his horse poundin' away.

"I was turnin' to the door when the baby started cryin' upstairs. She was near a year old by then and had a husky voice. There wasn't no other sound but that cryin' and nobody tryin' to stop it, and it made me shiver. It went on and on while I stood there in the hall downstairs and I didn't know what had happened up there or was happenin', so I figured it was my duty to go up and take a look.

"Leta was standin' in the hall outside the door of the big bedroom. She was wearin' something white, with her black hair down over her shoulders and her eyes as black as two coals. There was no life in her eyes; and her face, it looked like it had already died. That big fat Mex who was the baby's nurse stood at the other wall of the hall. When I came up, the nurse started jabberin' in Spanish, but Leta wasn't listenin'. In another room the baby kept on cryin'.

"Leta seen me then and said: 'Is he gone?' I said: 'Who—Anselm or the

boy?' She said: 'Anselm? Where is he? Will he come back?' I said: 'Your guess is as good as mine. But why worry? If he don't come back,' I said, 'there'll be plenty of young boys for you. Except they won't have Anselm's money.' Leta, she turned away from me and said to the Mex nurse: 'Go to the baby.' So I seen I was in the way and went out."

REUBEN JONES rose from his chair to poke the smoldering logs into flames.

"Did Anselm ever go back?" Rick asked.

"Never once. I didn't see him for eight years or so. I knew he'd sold out his holdin' right away and gone north. Then once I was short of cash and came to New York to get a loan from him. I got the loan, and now and then others. I guess I was the only one he'd ever given a cent to since the night he left that big white house."

"So that's it?" Rick said. "The bitterness."

"You don't know how bitter. And mean, too. Would you believe it, he wouldn't even let her keep that house? Sold it right over her head and cancelled his insurance policy that was in her name and never sent her a cent. He never cared what happened to her and the baby or to anybody else. He just wrote his poems that nobody read and let his money grow without hardly touchin' it except for the few dollars he needed. Saw nobody but me and sometimes Brenda and Debby when they got to feelin' sorry for him. And he'd never say a word about his wife and daughter. That's how Brenda never knew he'd ever been married or had a kid. . . . Your glass is empty."

Rick held out his glass for Jones to fill. He watched the wrinkled face bending toward him. Then he said quietly: "Why did you persuade Anselm to leave his money to his daughter?"

Jones' eyes rolled up to Rick's face. "How you guess I did?"

"Who else could it be? You're the only one he seemed to listen to."

"It happened a funny way," Jones said. "One night we was talkin' and I said how lonely it was to be old and without no family. Anselm said, with the bitter mouth of his, he was glad he had no family. I said: 'Did you ever divorce Leta?' It was the first time in nearly thirty years I said her name to him. He said: 'Not legally. It wasn't necessary. She was divorced from my life and mind.' Which was a lie, because she wasn't never out of his life and mind. He said: 'Anyway, she died twenty-two years ago.' You see, he knew that; he'd kept in touch some way. I said: 'What about your daughter?' He was quiet a long time. Then he said: 'How do you know she's my daughter?' I said: 'Figure it out. The girl was born ten months after you was married, wasn't she?'

"I guess that's what did it, though I can't be sure. Anyway, about a month or two later—six months ago, that was—he called me over to his house. His lawyer was there, arguin' about the will not makin' sense."

"Wait a minute," Rick said. "What were the provisions of his old will?"

"What old will? He'd never made no will. He didn't care what happened to his money."

"Then it would have gone to his daughter anyway," Rick pointed out. "That is, if she knew that Anselm was her father and came forward to claim the money. Probably Camilla or Sabina or whoever the daughter is wouldn't have heard about it because there wouldn't have been all those newspaper stories and Brenda would have

got the money, like she expected."

"You don't say?" Jones mused. "Well, anyway, the will Anselm wanted me to witness had only them two lines of poetry and the lawyer didn't like it. 'Anselm,' he said, 'It makes sense enough.' The lawyer said: 'At least tell me where I can find her.' Anselm said: 'I don't want her brought here. I don't want to see her. She'll get in touch with you when I'm dead. Now shut up,' he said. 'You're gettin' paid, ain't you?' So the lawyer shrugged and handed me his pen to sign and I did."

"He had been writing to her in Florida," Rick said.

"You mean that Sabina somebody?"

"Sabina Felice."

"That's the one," Jones said. "Debby told me about her and the letters. Well, she stole them letters or they're fakes."

"How do you know?"

"It stands to reason," Jones said. "Camilla Rogers is the right one. She had the papers and she knows things only Leta's daughter would know and she looks like Leta. Like I said before, why don't Brenda show some sense? She and Debby can still get plenty out of it."

THEY sat for a while looking into the flames. Rick finished his drink and shook his head when Jones reached for the bottle.

"You're interested in guns," Jones said. "Let me show you one I bought a couple years ago."

He stood in front of the fire and lifted a shotgun from its pegs above the mantelpiece. "It's a 12-gauge repeater. Five shots. You as good with one of these?"

Rick took the shotgun from him and examined it with the affection of an expert. "Only fair. I concentrate on small firearms. Fine job, this—a skeet gun."

"Sure, but it's just as good for live targets. I like to go after pheasants in season." He held out his hand for the gun and replaced it on the pegs. "I like small guns, too. That old .44 I was teachin' Debby with—too heavy, maybe, but I seen 'em do great things with 'em in the old days in Texas. That was a nifty revolver of yours. Got it on you?"

Rick glanced up at the old man leaning toward him. The wizened face was still, as if waiting.

"Yes," Rick said.

"Mind if I have a look at it? I didn't see it good before."

Rick unbuttoned his jacket and took the revolver out from under his shoulder and handed it to Jones.

"Holster, eh?" Jones muttered. He peered narrowly at Rick.

"Be careful; it's loaded," Rick said.

Reuben Jones swung out the cylinder. "Five shells, the way they used to load their six-guns out west." He swung the cylinder back and hefted the walnut stock against his palm. The muzzle hovered in Rick's direction.

Rick shifted in his chair, sitting forward on the edge of it. The old man's thumb was against the safety catch.

"Neatest gun I ever seen," Jones said.

"It's custom made. There's my monogram on the stock."

Jones turned the revolver sideways, but the muzzle remained on Rick. "Yeah—R. T. Got plenty of punch, I bet."

"More punch than anything smaller than a rifle," Rick said. "I have only standard .38 cartridges in it. They have enough penetration energy to go through six inch-thick pine boards. .357 magnum metal-tipped cartridges in that gun will penetrate twenty-four boards."

Jones chuckled. "These shells are

good enough. Don't you think so?"

The firelight flickered over that aged, wrinkled face. The eyes were as bright as a bird's. Rick wondered what would happen if he reached his hand out to take back the gun.

"Good enough for what?" Rick said quietly.

"Why, for what a gun's for—to kill somebody. Funny, Train, you walkin' around with a gun under your shoulder, like the gangsters wear 'em in the movies."

Rick didn't say anything. He shifted forward to the edge of the chair. The old man wasn't more than three feet away. The gun rested effortlessly against his palm.

"What're you after, Train?" Jones said. "Debby didn't know you. Brenda didn't want you there. Yet you came with a loaded gun."

"I hoped I'd have a chance to do some shooting."

"At animals?"

"At animals or inanimate targets," Rick said.

Reuben Jones pushed his tongue against his thin cheek. "You been askin' lots of questions. You drove me home so you could get me to talkin'."

"Naturally, I'm curious. It's an interesting story."

"Yeah, ain't it?" Jones raised his hand a little. The muzzle was level with Rick's eyes now. "What do you want, Train?"

"Right now," Rick said, "I'd like my revolver back."

REUBEN JONES turned the revolver and holding it by the barrel handed it stock-first to Rick. Then he laughed, the dry, high-pitched laughter of old men.

"Had you scared for a minute, didn't I? But you're all right, Train. You hardly showed it. Did you think I was goin' to drill a hole in you?"

"No," Rick said. He was deep in the chair once more, trying to relax, but something he couldn't control kept jumping inside of him.

"Sure not," Jones said. "If I aimed to kill a man, I wouldn't do it in my own house. That Sabina what's-her-name your woman?"

"My woman?"

"You know. She passes herself off as Anselm's daughter and you and her get the money."

"Don't be silly," Rick said.

Reuben laughed again. "I guess a lot of folks ain't doin' too much talkin', for all the words they say. How about another drink?"

"Thanks," Rick said.

CHAPTER IX

Deborah File

IT WAS only a little after eleven when Rick returned to the cottage, but all the lights were out. For a Saturday night the Files went to bed early.

He rolled his convertible up to the closed door of the garage and walked along the rear of the house to the back porch. The door leading into the kitchen was locked. It struck Rick that perhaps they had locked him out. He wouldn't put it beyond either of them.

He was descending the back steps and was on the last step when the gun roared in the night. This was no target shooting—at least not at an inanimate target. He felt, or thought he felt, the hot breath of the slug fan his cheek. He heard the ping of it strike something metallic in the wall behind him.

Then he was on the ground, lying full length and twisting away from the house with his revolver in his hand. High moonlight cast a mellow sheen over the yard, and Rick saw a white

form move against the tall white birches. The face was no more than a vague blob, but under it he could see that whoever had shot at him was wearing something light-colored and flowing, like a loose robe or negligee.

She paused there, just in front of the birches, and she seemed to be peering at him. Evidently she was not sure whether or not he was still alive. He was sprawled on the ground, where a dead man belonged, and he did not stir.

Rick watched her right arm hanging at her side. He was unable to see the gun in her hand, but he knew that it was there. She did not want to risk the noise of a second shot unless she thought it was necessary. And he must be sure not to let her lift her gun. Because she was very good. Good enough to have killed the girl across Central Park West, and good enough to have missed him by inches in that bad light and at better than a hundred feet.

That right arm, with the loose, flowing sleeve, lifted slowly carefully. Rick's revolver, the safety off, was in perfect position for a prone shot. He had a bead on her heart. Yet at the last moment he shifted the muzzle slightly to the left and squeezed.

Her right arm jerked downward. She spun in a half-turn, and in the blinking of an eye she had vanished among the birches.

He jumped up and ran forward. "Stay where you are!" he yelled.

There was no sound from the birches.

HE STOPPED, realizing that he was taking a foolhardy chance, running across that open space while she was under cover. He had nicked the fleshy part of her upper right arm—if he had hit what he had aimed at, and he was pretty sure that he had. The gun must now be in her left hand, and she was not as sure of her ability with

He leveled his gun at the shadowy form

that hand, or she was afraid of his own marksmanship and that if she missed him the flash of her gun would give her position away, or she was waiting for him to be reckless enough to plunge so close that she could easily pick him off.

Crouching low, he ran at an angle away from the birch copse and toward the garage. The woods came close to the rear of the garage, and he raced around the garage and then cut back among the oaks and maples to the birch copse. When he got closer, he slowed down, moving cautiously, for moonlight filtered in between the branches.

At the edge of the birch copse he stopped, peering at the myriad shadows. And he heard the patter of running feet—not close. It sounded as if

she was running in front of the house or on the road. He stood rigid, listening, and then he heard nothing at all except the chatter of insects.

It was only then that it occurred to him that he should have shot her in the leg.

He looked up at the house. There had been two shots, yet the windows remained dark. Perhaps Deborah and Miss File were out.

But the woman had been wearing a robe of some sort—a garment one would slip over a night dress. That meant somebody from the house.

But would either of them try to kill him here, where they would be immediately suspected?

Perhaps Camilla Rogers or Sabina Felice or a woman he did not know at all. But would any of them, far from home, be wearing a robe like that? Possibly, so that if she was seen, Deborah or Miss File would be suspected. Did that show too much cleverness? Well, wasn't the killer clever?

Warily Rick went along the side of the house. He looked up and down the road. On the right the road curved abruptly a hundred feet away. She had had time to round that curve or she might be hiding in the woods that fringed the road.

He went up the front porch. The door was unlocked. As he closed the door behind him, light snapped on in the living room. He dropped the revolver into a pocket.

Cynthia, dressed in a pink bathrobe too tight for her dumpy figure, stood in the doorway with the light behind her.

"Who's that?" she called. Rick stepped into the light. Her breath came out in a relieved gush. "Oh, it's you, Mr. Train. Did you hear somebody yell outside?"

"I heard what sounded like shots," Rick said.

"Oh, that. That's the hunters. There's a swamp back there, and they hunt sometimes all night. But there was yelling awful close. My room's off the kitchen and it sounded right next to my window."

"Did you see anybody?"

"I saw a man running over to the garage."

"That was me," Rick said. "I'm afraid the shots startled me. I suppose the hunters chased an animal almost to the house and then yelled after they shot."

"They sounded awful close. Right outside my window."

"Did anybody come into the house just now?"

"Just you, Mr. Train. Miss File and Miss Debby are asleep."

"Well, good-night," Rick said.

AN ANEMIC night-bulb had been left on for him in the upstairs hall. He had been up here only once and didn't know the layout, but by eliminating the bathroom door and the door to his room and a linen closet door, only two doors remained, which was the right number.

Gently Rick opened the first of those two doors a couple of inches. He heard rasping snores and pushed the door all the way in. Moonlight poured into the four windows of the big corner bedroom, clearly revealing Miss Brenda File lying flat on her back in a poster bed.

He entered the room. A green robe lay across the foot of the bed. He examined it by moonlight and saw no bullet hole, no blood. The slippers at the side of the bed showed no sign of dirt or dust or moisture.

He straightened up. Miss File's arms were over the cover, but she wore long-sleeved mannish pajamas. He leaned over her, peering at the upper right arm.

That .38 slug from his revolver had at least broken the skin, if it hadn't done more damage, and at the most there had been time only for the crudest bandage. But there was no blood soaking through the sleeve, and when he touched the arm lightly he felt no bandage.

Suddenly Miss File stirred, flinging the arm he had touched over her head. Startled, Rick drew back. Miss File's snores struck a different rhythm. He was satisfied. She could never throw an arm that had been nicked around like that. He went out, closing the door softly behind him.

Deborah's room was next. Her low regular breathing came out to him when he opened the door a crack. He went all the way in. This was a smaller room, containing only two windows, but moonlight was strong in here too. Deborah's blanket was up to her chin. She looked lovely with the moonbeams in her tousled curls, but he hadn't come in here to admire her beauty.

Her blue furry slippers were dry and unstained. A white negligee over the back of a chair looked as if it had never been worn. He turned back to the bed —and looked into her open eyes.

"Hello," Rick said. It sounded downright silly, but what else could he say under the circumstances?

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

"I drove Reuben Jones home and hung around his place for a while," he told her. "I came to apologize for staying away."

Her grave, wide eyes didn't believe him. "Whatever you think of my conduct with Joe Barr, I don't make a practice of receiving men in my room at night. Get out."

He didn't move. "Did you hear the shots?"

"That's what woke me. I think it's outrageous allowing hunting at night and so close to where people live. And they were shouting too." She added stiffly: "Don't tell me the shots frightened you?"

"Those weren't hunters," he said "At least, a human being was being hunted."

SHE sat up. Rick watched the blanket fall away from her; she was wearing a sleeveless nightgown. But the blanket didn't leave her right arm. With her left hand crossed over her bosom, she held a cover of the blanket on her right shoulder so that it completely hid that arm. The gesture couldn't be modesty because the left side of her to the hip was left uncovered.

"What do you mean?" she said.

"Somebody shot at me and I shot back. She missed me and I nicked her right arm. She got away."

"She!" Almost the blanket slipped off her right shoulder, but her fingers tightened on it. "A woman! Do you know who it is?"

"I'm not sure," he said quietly.

There wasn't enough light to see her face very clearly, but there was no doubt of her terror. It could mean anything—that she was afraid of discovery, or thinking that her aunt was going around taking potshots at people, or simple fear of a murderer in the neighborhood.

"Has it—has it anything to do with us?" she faltered.

"You mean the will? Yes."

"But why? And why you?"

"Somebody is afraid that I know too much."

Deborah relaxed a little against the headboard of the bed. "Camilla Rogers! Because you know of her connection with that gangster."

"Maybe," Rick said. "Well, sorry to have disturbed you."

He was at the door before she spoke.

"Rick, you didn't come in here to tell me about the shooting. I watched you. You were looking for something."

She still would not let the blanket leave her right shoulder, and she still had not thought of covering the bodice of her low-cut nightgown. Very charming, but the charm of the picture she made there in the moonlight enraged Rick. He felt that she was using her beauty to make a sucker out of him.

"You heard me come in," he said, "but you pretended to be asleep."

"I wondered what you were up to. What did you want?"

He let her have it squarely. "To see if your right arm is wounded."

There was a long silence. She glanced at her right shoulder, and did not show her arm. Instead, with an indignant yank, she pulled the blanket up over both shoulders.

"So you think I tried to kill you?" she said.

"I'd like to be sure." He went back across the room and stood at the side of her bed. "It's not gentlemanly, getting tough with a beautiful girl, but being shot at doesn't put one in a gentlemanly mood. Let's see your arm."

"It seems that you came to my house for the express purpose of insulting me."

"I'm sorry, but I didn't come here to be murdered either. I've got no reason to trust any female I come across—anyway, not after the fourth attempt made on my life by one. Will you let me see your arm?"

"No!"

His hand shot out. She must have anticipated that, for her fingers hooked into the blanket. When he tugged, her head and shoulders bobbed forward, but the blanket remained in position. He closed his hand over the fingers on her right shoulder, and ripped at them, so angry that he didn't care what happened after that. He could feel her panting breath against his cheek. Then she uttered a little sob and her fingers loosened and the blanket came away.

He stepped back, breathing hard, not from the physical effort because it had not been much of a struggle. She leaned against the headboard, the blanket in disorder about her hips, and put both palms over her breasts.

Her right arm was unmarked.

"Don't you see that I had to be sure?" he said.

She said nothing and her face showed nothing.

"Good-night," he said, and went out.

In the hall he fumbled for his pipe, hating himself a little. Then he went downstairs and phoned Hal Zeller.

CHAPTER X

Nelda Ware

IN THE morning Rick had no trouble finding the bullet that had been fired at him. It had struck a shingle nail about the height of his ear, and, he estimated, no more than a couple of inches from where he had been standing on the bottom step.

The slug had driven the nail farther into the shingle and flattened. His pipe reamer easily pried it out. It was too badly mashed to be good for identification, though by the size of it he guessed it to be a .32 caliber bullet. Miss File had a .32 Colt and the girl had been killed by a .32 Alkar.

Cynthia stuck her head out through the back door. "Miss File says breakfast is ready."

They had all slept late that Sunday morning. When Rick had come down at nine-thirty, he had found only Cynthia up. It was now past ten.

Miss File and Deborah were waiting

for him at the dining room table. He tried to get heartiness into his good-morning.

Deborah glanced up from her orange juice and nodded. There was no dislike in her face. She merely looked tired, as if she had had little sleep after he had left her room.

Miss Brenda File said: "I was sure you had left last night, Mr. Train. You and your car were gone. Then when I came down this morning, Cynthia told me you had slept here and were out in back."

"I drove Reuben Jones home and hung around there for an hour, talking."

Miss File had been reaching for a roll. Her hand stopped, hovering over the woven breadbasket, then dipped slowly. "Talking about what?"

"Guns and things. He has a fine shotgun."

"Did he discuss with you this girl Camilla Rogers?" Miss File asked carefully.

"He said you ought to accept her offer to split the money."

"Reuben is a fool," Miss File said sharply. "Or else——" She cut the rest off and broke the roll.

That ended conversation until Cynthia came in with coffee. In the hall the telephone rang.

Miss File jumped visibly. She started to her feet, but Deborah was up as quickly and closer to the door. "I'll take it, Auntie," she said and went out to the hall.

Miss File sank back into her chair. There wasn't much left of her self-control. Although she sat straight enough in her chair, she somehow gave Rick the impression of cowering there as she strained to listen to Deborah's low voice

Rick held out his hand. "Take it easy," he said

in the hall. Deborah's voice reached them.

"It's for you, Rick," she called.

Miss File gave a little sigh.

As Rick went across the living room, he met Deborah coming back. He blocked her way between the couch and a table.

"Are you angry?" he said.

She raised her grave dark eyes to his. "No," she said listlessly. "I can understand how you felt." She brushed past him and he went on to the hall.

FIVE minutes later he was back. He took his seat and said: "That was my friend Hal Zeller of the *Courier-Express*. I gave him this number last night to phone me if there were any new developments on the Anselm File will. Camilla Rogers breezed into the city last evening and got in touch with the newspapers in time to make the Sunday papers. The papers are delighted, especially as all three of the claimants have photogenic figures."

Miss File raised gray eyebrows. "Three?"

"The third one is coming up. Anselm was over forty when he started making daughters. Evidently he was quite prolific."

"This is becoming an out-and-out farce," Miss File declared.

"Sure," Rick said. "The newspapers are going to have a field day. Joe Barr knows how to get a good play in the newspapers. That's why he decided to spring this third daughter on a Sunday —Nelda Ware is her name. He knows that news columns are loosest on Mondays. Nothing ever happens on Sunday, aside from the war, and even that——"

Deborah took a long time coming in. "Joe Barr?" she said, frowning. "What has Joe got to do with this?"

"Nelda Ware is his property. He's been working for a month now, he says, trying to uncover Anselm's daughter. He reasoned that she'd shell out with a fat fee if he steered her over to her dad's millions. And here, ladies and gentlemen, she is, he says—not a phony fortune hunter like Sabina Felice or Camilla Rogers, but the genuine, one hundred percent, dyed-in-the-wool article. At two o'clock this afternoon, newspapermen, especially cameramen, will be permitted to meet her in his apartment on Lexington Avenue."

Deborah's chair crashed over. "It's a lie!"

"Debby, control yourself," Miss File snapped. But she wasn't having an easy time restraining her own emotions. She was trying to break the spoon in her hand.

Deborah put her hands flat on the table and glowered down at Rick. "It's a lie," she repeated. "You made that up."

Rick hated the idea of her wasting so much faith on Joe Barr. "All right, so your private detective is a pink angel. He hasn't got a wife in Boston and he wouldn't dream of pulling a fast one on you. You can prove that easily enough. I'm sure you have his phone number."

"I have," Deborah flung at him and swept out of the room.

Rick picked up his cup. The coffee was cold, but he drank it. He could hear Deborah calling a number in the hall.

"You ought to be pleased," he told Miss File. "Too many daughters most likely mean no daughter. They cancel each other out."

Miss File had put down the spoon. She looked at the backs of her hands, and her lips were tight and thin.

Rick listened to Deborah speaking on the phone, not to her words because he couldn't distinguish them, but to the shrillness of her voice. He stood up.

"I'm going back to New York," he said. "That ought to cheer you up."

In the hall the telephone slammed on its cradle and from the sound of it the whole business fell to the floor. Then he heard Deborah running up the stairs.

"It would seem," Rick said dryly, "that she has just spoken to Joe Barr."

Miss File didn't seem to hear him.

RICK stopped his car in front of a block-square apartment house and took from the seat the Sunday *Courier-Express*, which he had just bought on the way over.

Before the war the latest developments on the File story would have made headlines on page one, but these days it was forced to share page four with four columns of liquor ads. Camilla Rogers' photo took up two columns. The cameraman was an artist; he had missed none of her curves and had found a few more, as well as a dimple in her knee. Under the photo her statement was printed substantially as Rick had heard it in the cottage.

His chief interest was in the two column box beside the photo, the substance of which he had phoned in to Hal Zeller last night. It was the kind of thing the *Courier-Express*, which cherished sensationalism, liked to go in for—not a news story or an editorial, but combining the worst features of the two. The box read, under Hal Zeller's byline:

> It is not the desire of this newspaper to do the work of Captain Harcourt Connell of the Homicide Bureau, for which he zealously collects the taxpayers' money every pay-day. It may be possible, however, to nudge the redoubtable captain into buckling down to try solving the murder of the attractive young woman who was mysteriously shot dead Friday night on Central Park West, and who has not yet been identified.
>
> The public does not expect miracles from its servants, but it does expect a man who draws a captain's pay to be able to see the nose in front of his face. There are three questions that the public has a right to ask—and will ask.
>
> 1. For six weeks Anselm File's curious will and the search for the "Cinderella girl" have been featured in every newspaper in the country. Why, then, has Captain Connell been unable to see the connection between the puzzling provisions of the will and the murder of the young woman?
>
> 2. Why, when claimants to the File millions are falling over each other, hasn't Captain Connell taken steps to ascertain whether the slain girl is Anselm File's unknown daughter?
>
> 3. Why does not Captain Connell undertake to trace the identity of the slain girl in any of the following cities: Palm City, Florida; Dig Center, Texas; San Antonio, Texas?
>
> When Captain Harcourt Connell rouses himself sufficiently to obtain the answers to the above questions, this newspaper, whose sole function is to gather and present news, will be glad to make them public to those who pay his salary.

RICK folded the paper and locked his car and entered the apartment building.

The door to Joe Barr's apartment was partly open and a hum of voices drifted out to the hall. Rick went in. The big living room was already hazy with smoke and a dozen newspapermen and women stood about sipping cocktails.

Hal Zeller was watching the door. He pushed his bulk over to Rick.

"How'd you like the story, Rick?"

"I don't approve of bludgeons," Rick said.

"Oh, sure," Hal said. "I had finesse and subtlety, but you know Morrow, the new Sunday city editor. He said: 'Can you back this up with facts?' I said: 'Rick Train can.' He said: 'Good enough for me. But pile it on. The readers love to see a cop getting the works.'" Hal scratched his nose. "I hope to God you can back the story up."

"So do I," Rick muttered, and turned to greet Joe Barr.

"Hello, Ricky," Barr said. "Don't tell me you could tear yourself away from Debby so soon!" He made no

attempt to shake hands with him.

"Hello, rat," Rick said.

Barr laughed, but his laughter was strained. His mouth was pale and there was a nervous tick in his cheek. He wasn't feeling too happy about having to face all these reporters.

"What the hell, Ricky. I'm a detective for the money in it. How'd you like to meet File's daughter?"

"It's becoming a habit," Rick said.

Two strange women were at the other end of the room.

One was a little old woman who sat stiffly on the edge of a chair with a permanent frown of disapproval on her pinched face. She looked like anybody's straightlaced grandmother, and she was having a hard time taking a roomful of drinking men and women.

The other was a baby-faced platinum blonde in the center of a semicircle of reporters. She was giggling into her cocktail glass.

Joe Barr steered Rick to the blonde. "Nelda, I want you to meet Rick Train. Ricky—Nelda Ware, who is Anselm File's daughter."

"Ah, Mr. Train," she said in a Deep South accent. "It's such a pleasure to meet all you New York reporters." And she giggled again.

Rick said: "I've been meeting all your sisters."

"Sisters?" The giggle broke in two. "You mean those cheap chiselers?" Her face lost its babyishness. It was suddenly hard—the face of a fading blonde no longer as young as she would like to be. "They ought to be put in jail."

Rick looked at her right arm hanging awkwardly at her side. She was holding the glass in her left hand. Her long sleeves were fastened tightly about her wrists.

"OKAY, ladies and gentlemen," Joe Barr called. "I guess you're all here. We might as well start the interview. It will be a lot simpler if I outline the facts first.

Reporters took out scraps of paper and pencils. Cameramen unlimbered their cameras.

"Not all of you have met Mrs. Martha Ware." Barr turned toward the little old woman. She started to smile, then changed her mind and frowned as a flashlight bulb flared.

"Nelda Ware's mother?" a reporter asked.

"Her foster mother," Barr said. "Leta File, the wife of Anselm File, was her mother. The facts are simple. I might point out that Nelda's name was once Camilla——"

"Like Camilla Rogers, who also claims to be the daughter."

Barr smiled, and again Rick got the impression that he was keyed up and nervous. "That's why Camilla Rogers got the idea she could pass herself off as the daughter—the first name is the same. Incidentally, do any of you know that Camilla Rogers has been living with Eddie Mix for the last year or two?"

Everybody in the room seemed to know. Rick glanced toward the door and saw Sergeant Midge standing lazily against the wall in his unpressed clothes and battered hat. Blankly Rick met his eyes, then turned back to Barr.

"When Nelda—I'll call her that because she prefers it—was less than a year old, her father walked out on her and her mother," Barr was saying. "This was in the little one-horse Texas town of Dig Center. Mother and daughter had a tough time of it for six or seven years and then the mother died, leaving the little daughter alone in the world without a cent to her name."

"That agrees with Camilla Rogers."

"All this is well known in Dig Cen-

ter," Barr said. "Eddie Mix might have gone there for information so as to make her story stick as close to the facts as possible. But here's where her lies are shown up. The fact is that little Camilla never left Dig Center—not till she was a young lady, anyway. Mrs. Martha Ware was the local school teacher. She was a widow, her husband having died several years before, and childless. She was sorry for the little orphan girl and took her to live with her. Mrs. Ware has legal adoption papers and other documents."

The little old woman nodded vigorously. "Every word he says is the gospel truth. You can see the papers if you don't believe it."

"That won't be necessary, Mrs. Ware," Barr said. "The documents are being turned over to the administrator of Mr. File's estate—Arthur Fellows of White Plains. Furthermore, statements by the older natives of Dig Center as well as school records and so forth will bear out what I have told you."

HAL ZELLER said: "I can understand the girl taking her foster mother's second name on adoption, but where does the Nelda come in?"

"I changed it after I left Dig Center," Nelda explained. "Camilla sounded too —well, too Latin. Maybe you don't feel about it that way in the East here, but I didn't want to be mistaken for a Mexican. Even though," she said quickly, "I'm Mexican on my mother's side."

"Do Mexicans have blonde daughters?" Hall said.

Nelda Ware touched her platinum hair and momentarily the hardness flashed across her features. Rick noticed that again she used her left hand, keeping her right arm very stiffly at her side.

"It happens sometimes," Barr said quickly, "and Anselm File's hair, I understand, was a light brown before he lost it all. But the fact is that Nelda had dyed her hair. Anybody who knows about such things can tell."

Mrs. Ware rose to her feet, staring toward the door. "Aren't you Reuben Jones?"

Everybody turned. Deborah and Reuben Jones had come in quietly and stood close together just inside the door, as if trying to make themselves inconspicuous.

"Who're you?" Jones demanded.

"Why, Reuben Jones, you remember me—Martha Ware. You used to come to our home in Dig Center and play poker with Michael, my husband. You knew Michael Ware very well."

"Yeah, Mike Ware." Jones shifted his feet unhappily.

A reporter asked: "Can you identify this woman, Mr. Jones?"

"Ain't been in Dig Center close to thirty years," Jones hedged.

"Reuben Jones, you know I'm Martha Ware."

"All right, I know." Jones flashed sudden fire. "But this is a fake, Martha, and that's something you know. This girl don't look nothin' like Leta. Camilla Rogers is the spittin' image of Leta, and you know that too."

"Are you calling me a liar, Reuben Jones?" Mrs. Ware shrilled.

"You can call them that don't tell the truth anything you like."

The rest was chaos. The reporters gathered about Jones, scribbling down his shouted accusations. Then they swung to Mrs. Ware, who had an acid tongue and was recalling loudly that Reuben Jones had always been an unreliable drunkard, even in the days when he had been rich.

Rick stayed out of it, along with others: Deborah, motionless and white-

faced, remaining at the door; Sergeant Midge looking bored but taking everything in; Nelda Ware isolated for the moment beside the table on which glasses and the pitcher almost empty of cocktails stood; Joe Barr threading carefully over toward the door.

Rick went to pour himself a cocktail. As he reached for the pitcher, he brushed heavily against Nelda Ware's right shoulder. She gave a startled gasp.

"Oops, sorry," Rick said.

She rubbed that shoulder with her left arm. "That's all right," she muttered. Rick thought that he had probably hit her hard enough to hurt her even if there were no wound.

The shouts subsided, and then suddenly one voice rang out sharply.

"You scoundrel!" Deborah said to Joe Barr.

RICK turned to see them facing each other near the door. Deborah's hands clasped her handbag furiously, as if she were restraining them from doing something else.

"Listen, Debby!" Barr said urgently. Then he realized that attention had shifted to him and he grinned sheepishly. "I'll see you tonight."

"You will not!" Debby told him and went through the door at her back.

Reuben Jones looked about in bewilderment and then followed her.

The reporters were curious, but Barr brushed aside their questions as he returned to the front of the room. "Purely personal. Now let me go on, please."

He resumed his position between Mrs. Ware, who was breathing hard and mumbling indignantly to herself, and Nelda Ware. His face was a shade paler than before.

"What just happened is further proof of Mrs. Ware's identity, if any more is needed," Barr said in perfect composure. "Anybody in Dig Center will establish what I've been telling you, as well as the fact that Leta File's daughter remained there, living in Mrs. Ware's home, until she was seventeen. At that time Nelda decided to make her own way in the world. I won't take up your time with her history during the next twelve years; the details will be furnished at the proper time and place."

"What about Anselm File's letters to Sabina Felice?" a woman reporter asked.

Nelda scowled at her. "She faked 'em! She's nothing but a cheap crook!"

"Please, Nelda, let me handle this." Barr's sleek face maintained its tired smile. "Those letters may be forgeries; as yet I cannot say. Or if they are genuine, it is obvious that Sabina Felice tricked Anselm File into believing that she was his daughter. My own belief is that somehow she learned he had a daughter with whom he had lost touch —or rather, never tried to keep in touch. Knowing he was rich, she wrote him, pretending to be his daughter and asking for money. By that time he'd had a change of heart and allowed himself to be taken in by her. Needless to say, those letters alone will never establish her claim in the face of the preponderance of evidence that Nelda is the daughter of Leta Garcia and Anselm File."

Rick asked his only question. "Has Nelda Ware been back to Dig Center since she left at seventeen?"

Barr shook his head. "But she has been in constant correspondence with her foster mother. Mrs. Ware has all the letters. That, in brief, is the outline. You may now ask either of the women all the questions you want."

The reporters closed in on Nelda Ware.

Sergeant Midge at last moved his

shoulder-blades from the wall and gently plucked Hal Zeller's sleeve. They spoke to each other and then Hal came over to Rick, who was finishing his cocktail.

"Captain Harcourt Connell would have a word with me," Hal said sourly. "That box I wrote didn't look too good when I came up here. Now it's not only silly. That girl's story makes it close to libel."

"I said I'd take the rap."

"That's damn decent of you. It's my name on the byline and you'll be safely buried away in the Army in a couple of days."

"Five days."

Hall scratched his nose. "Serves me right," he grunted and went out with Sergeant Midge.

RICK drained the last of the cocktail and left a minute later.

Deborah was seated in the lobby. She stood up when Rick stepped out of the elevator.

"Don't tell me you're waiting for me?" he said.

"Yes." She touched his arm. "Rick, I didn't hear all of it. Is she really my uncle's daughter?"

Rick said carefully: "Joe Barr knows his business. He wouldn't rig up an obvious phony."

"What do you mean—obvious?"

"I'm not sure. Her story is even better than Camilla's, and certainly much better than Sabina's, who probably has more to say than we've already heard." He cupped her elbow in his palm and they went out to the street. "Where's Reuben?"

"He went to meet somebody." On the sidewalk, she stopped, facing him. "Rick, what about that story I read in the *Courier-Express*? About the girl who was shot on Central Park West. And what about the attempt to kill you last night? Can you explain them?"

"All I know is that the pieces fit somehow," Rick said. "Did you have lunch yet?"

"I promised to eat with Auntie and Mrs. Homer."

"Who's Mrs. Homer?"

"An old friend of Auntie's."

"Where does she live?"

"On West Eighty-First Street."

Rick glanced toward his parked car and then back to her. "Did you and your aunt stay there Friday night?"

"We generally do when we spend the night in the city. Mrs. Homer lives alone and is an invalid." Her head came up sharply, her grave eyes searching his face. "I see," she said bitterly. "You're trying to be clever. That girl was shot at that corner. I should know better, by now, than to talk to you."

"Wait," he said as she turned away. "I'm always getting off on the wrong foot with you. Let me drive you uptown and try to square myself."

"I'll take the subway," she said coldly.

Rick watched her move down the street until she was out of sight. The lunch he ate in solitude was a bleak affair.

CHAPTER XI

A Woman Afraid

THE telephone rang a few minutes after Rick let himself into his hotel room.

"Mr. Train? This is Brenda File." She sounded breathless. "I've been trying to get you for the last half-hour."

"I just came in," Rick said. "Did you come to the city with Debby?"

"Reuben came with us too. They both wanted to have a look at this latest claimant. Frankly, I didn't have the stomach to meet another one. Debby

told me all about it at lunch time."

"Is Debby with you now?"

"She went down for cigarettes and Clara is resting in her room. I'm alone here. I didn't want anybody to hear me phone you."

"Is Clara Mrs. Homer?"

"Yes. She's—" She stopped and laughed shortly, tightly. "You know everything, don't you? I suppose you also know that May Carter was coming to see me at Mrs. Homer's Friday night when she was murdered."

"I didn't know her name was May Carter."

"Well, it is. I dislike long conversation over the telephone and there's a lot to discuss. May I see you?"

"Of course," Rick said. "What else do you know about May Carter?"

"Nothing else. She phoned me at my home Friday afternoon. She said that somebody was going to try to hoodwink us into believing that this somebody was Anselm's daughter."

"So May Carter isn't the daughter?"

"Naturally not," Miss File said. "She wouldn't be interested in ten thousand dollars if she could get all of Anselm's money. That's how much she wanted from me in return for proof, which she said she had, that the claimant was a fake."

"There are three claimants now. Which one was she going to expose?"

"She refused to say until I gave her the money. I haven't anything like ten thousand dollars, and I doubt if I would have paid it to her on such flimsy evidence."

"So you sent her to me?"

"Yes," Miss File said. "I heard your aunt speak about you at a bridge party one night last week. You were the only New York reporter I knew of, and it seemed to me that if a newspaper bought May Carter's story it would accomplish the same purpose as if I myself paid. It seemed logical, then."

RICK chuckled. "You're a business woman Miss File. But there wasn't a chance any paper would give her more than a couple of hundred, if that."

"That occurred to me. But I hoped that a clever reporter might be able to wheedle the information out of her somehow. Naturally I didn't want to lose contact with her, so I made an appointment with her to see me at Mrs. Homer's apartment the following morning. When she got no satisfaction from you, she evidently decided to look me up at once."

"She was scared," Rick said. "She told me she'd come back to the paper the next morning to offer the proposition again, but I'd convinced her that she couldn't get any real money out of the paper. She must have decided to try to reach a settlement at once with you and then beat it out of danger. But she was shot before she could reach you. Were you at Mrs. Homer's apartment at that time?"

"Yes. I'd come in Friday evening with Debby."

"When did you learn that May Carter was murdered?"

Miss File snorted impatiently. "We can discuss all this when I see you."

"I can hear you all right and you say you're alone," Rick said. "Don't leave me dangling in midair."

"I didn't hear about the murder until later, when you told me in your room. Before that something happened. It was about twelve-thirty Friday night and I was sitting up talking with Mrs. Homer when the phone rang. It was for me. How the person knew I was there I can't imagine. The voice was very odd. It sounded muffled and far away. I can't even tell you whether it was a man or woman speaking."

"Probably speaking through a hand-

kerchief over the mouthpiece."

"Was that it?" Miss File said. "Well, that voice warned me of death if I mentioned May Carter had communicated with me. At that time I was certain that it was May Carter herself. I thought that she had regretted getting in touch with me. I wasn't greatly frightened when I hung up. I went to bed, but I couldn't sleep. I lay tossing and wondering if May Carter had got in touch with you. After a while I called the *Courier-Express* and got the name of your hotel and called you, but you weren't in. On an impulse, I dressed and took the subway to your hotel. The desk clerk told me you didn't answer your phone, but I went up anyway on the chance that you were in and didn't want to be disturbed. I waited in your room for you."

"The door was really unlocked?"

FOR a moment her voice resumed its old stiffness. "It was. And I didn't poison your whiskey and I didn't try to kill you last night." Abruptly she was breathing hard again over the wire. "Debby just told me about that—how a woman tried to shoot you outside my house. That person is a fiend. I am not a coward, Mr. Train, but I was afraid. When you told me in your room that a girl had been shot half a block from Mrs. Homer's apartment, I knew that it was May Carter. And I remembered that voice warning me on the telephone."

"Where was Debby that night?"

"I think she was visiting friends in Greenwich Village. Why?"

"Nothing," Rick said. "So then in my room you decided to drop the whole matter. You invited me for the weekend because that was the only sound reason you could give me for being in my room."

"Don't you see how I felt? If a false claimant for Anselm's money would murder that poor girl, then why not Debby and me as well? We'd be put out of the way if we caused any trouble over the will."

"But you didn't receive Camilla Rogers with open arms."

Miss File sniffed. "I realized when there were two claimants that the matter had become quite complicated for the murderer. It seemed likely that she was really Anselm's daughter and——"

"Now it seems more likely that Nelda Ware is."

"Debby doesn't think so. Anyway, yesterday evening that voice phoned me again."

"When Cynthia and I came into the hall?"

"Yes. She—I'll assume it's a woman—didn't seem to care whether or not I fought the claimants to the money. All she wanted was for me to keep quiet about May Carter. I admit I was terrified. That person was worried over the murder and would murder again to cover herself up. It's so easy for somebody to come along and kill you. The voice mentioned you. She suspected that I was working with you. I tried to explain when you and Cynthia came in. And then I went up to the guest room with you and tried to persuade you to leave the house in order to satisfy the voice."

"And now you're no longer afraid?"

"I didn't say that." Her voice dropped. "Listen, Mr. Train. I believe I know who the murderer is."

Rick took a deep breath. "Who?"

"I can't speak over the phone," Miss File said agitatedly. "There are loose ends. I'm not clear on certain things. I need the advice of a man like you who is experienced in police matters."

"Why can't I come up to where you are?"

"We might be disturbed by Mrs.

Homer. I'm leaving at once. Please wait for me."

"But——"

This time he couldn't keep her on the wire. He heard the click of her hanging up.

FORTY minutes later Rick sent down for a fresh supply of tobacco. It shouldn't have taken Miss File more than twenty minutes to get here by subway or taxi. At the end of an hour he asked the switchboard operator to get him Mrs. Homer's number. There was no answer.

He found himself pacing the room and glancing at his watch every couple of minutes. It was an hour and a half now. Probably she had changed her mind, but he had to continue waiting on the chance that she would still show up.

There was a gentle rap on the door. Rick strode hurriedly across the room and threw the door open.

Sergeant Midge stepped into the room.

Rick had been expecting him or possibly Captain Connell himself since Hal Zeller had been dragged off to headquarters. This was a hell of a time for him to come. He hoped that he could get rid of him before Miss File arrived. She wouldn't talk with Midge there.

"Don't you ever stop at the desk to call up first?" Rick said irritably.

Midge shook his head. "People have a way of saying they're not at home when a cop calls." He closed the door behind him. "Every time I come into this room I feel like a raven, or whatever it is that brings bad news."

Rick felt his breath clog in his throat. "Did anything happen to Miss File?"

"If you mean Brenda File, something did," Midge said. "She was shot dead in the subway about an hour and a half ago."

CHAPTER XII

Sergeant Midge

RICK sat on his bed and told Sergeant Midge about his telephone conversation with Miss Brenda File. He looked and sounded as sick as he felt. Midge listened with his drowsy pale-blue eyes half-closed and did not interrupt.

When Rick finished, Midge picked up the telephone and called headquarters. "Harry? The girl who was knocked off Friday night is named May Carter." He spelled it. "Nothing else. You have her description. Get out new flyers with her name on them."

"Tell him to try Palm City or Dig Center," Rick suggested.

Midge glanced around at him and then nodded once and said into the mouthpiece: "Send wires at once to Palm City, Florida, and Dig Center, Texas. And while you're at it, San Antonio."

Midge hung up and flicked his hat to the back of his head. "Keep talking, Rick."

"I told you what Miss File told me over the phone."

"Look, Rick," Midge said patiently. "Zeller says you're behind that swill of his in the *Courier-Express*. You wouldn't stick your neck out for Connell's ax unless you knew how to blunt it."

"Miss File's murder proves the questions were justified."

"Except those questions appeared hours before she was murdered. And you can't tell me you ever seriously thought May Carter was Anselm's daughter."

"I can make mistakes," Rick said. "I know now I was wrong because Miss File told me."

"You don't make those kind of mis-

takes, Rick. A girl who's due to inherit a couple of million doesn't try so had to sell her story to a newspaper for a paltry few grand. You suggested that May Carter was the daughter only for a feeler. You were after something. But let's go back. When did you first catch the connection?"

"Yesterday morning when I found my bourbon was poisoned."

Midge leaned forward against the back of the chair behind which he stood. "Uh-huh. And you just told me Brenda File was in this room when you came back from the hospital. Who analyzed the whiskey?"

"I smelled the usual odor of bitter almonds and assumed it was poison."

"You read that in a book. What did you do with the stuff?"

"I poured it down the drain."

MIDGE sighed. "All right, so you don't want to get the chemist in trouble. Let it ride. The fact is, you sound a lot like an accessory to me."

"Oh, no," Rick said lightly. "It's no legal crime not to draw the proper deduction from events. I simply didn't know how to put two and two together."

"Rick, save your heavy sarcasm for Connell. What was your game?"

"Miss File didn't murder May Carter," Rick said.

"Maybe not. But you didn't know it then. You knew that a woman was trying to murder you and that Miss File had tried to poison you."

"Nuts! Two and two make four if you're sure you've got your two and two. There was a chance that somebody else had been in the room between the time you and I left it and Miss File arrived. As a matter of fact, it's plain now that's what happened."

"But it wasn't plain then," Midge said. "You didn't go to the police with information which might have helped solve a murder. You went to the File house in Westchester to do your own snooping. Something must have happened there to make you so sure of the connection between the murder and the will that you phoned Zeller last night to ask those questions in that filthy rag."

"A woman shot at me," Rick told him casually.

Midge almost smiled. "I was wondering if you'd be gracious enough to tell me that."

"That means you spoke to Deborah File."

"The first thing she wanted to know when we picked her up was whether you'd been knocked off too. She told me about the poison and the shooting."

"Cagey little man," Rick said dryly.

"I don't know. You don't fall into traps. Who shot at you, Rick?"

Rick stuck his arms between his knees. "Deborah must have told you I didn't know. It was too dark to see her face. All I could tell was that she was a woman. While I was trying some hipper-dipper stuff to take her from the rear, she crossed me up and ran down the road. I suppose a car was waiting for her."

"She couldn't have run into the house, could she?"

"You mean hide there until I went to sleep."

Sharpness touched Midge's voice. "You know damn well what I mean."

"Well, I doubt if it was the maid," Rick said. "We know now that it wasn't Miss Brenda File. And it couldn't be Deborah File because there is no wound on her arm. Did she tell you that I wounded whoever shot at me?"

"She made very sure to tell me. About all she didn't do was to roll up her sleeve and show me. You may be good, Rick, but not good enough to see a bullet flying. How do you know you

hit her in the arm—or at all?"

"She jerked her arm."

"Maybe the explosion of your gun startled her," Midge pointed out. "Maybe she felt the whiff of the slug and jumped. Now don't tell me that you always hit what you aim at or I'll really get sore. What are you after, Rick? To make it a personal affair between you and the dame who is out to get you?"

RICK took time to think it over and then nodded slowly. "I guess you can call it that."

"I almost believe you. It hurts your pride, I suppose, to have a dame try to bump off a crack shot like you. So you make it a private vendetta. And the questions you gave Hal Zeller to spread in his sheet were to give the killer the jitters and drive her into a false move."

"Something like that."

Midge's lips tightened. "You gave her the jitters all right. She figured Brenda File had spilled to you and promptly went and killed her."

Rick stared at his clasped hands between his knees and said nothing. Since Midge had told him about the murder of Miss File, he had been trying not to let the thought torment him.

"Or maybe it wasn't that at all," Midge said. "Maybe the killer heard Brenda File talk to you on the phone."

Rick's head came up sharply. "Now you're talking through your hat. There was nobody in the apartment with her at the time but Mrs. Homer. I trust you don't suspect Mrs. Homer?"

"No. She's an invalid. But somebody could have heard Miss File out in the hall. The telephone table is near the hall door. Deborah File went out for cigarettes. Say she came back while her aunt was talking to you and listened out in the hall."

Rick stood up angrily. "She wouldn't kill her aunt."

"She was third in line for her uncle's dough," Midge said placidly. "First there's the daughter, then the sister, then the niece. Deborah eliminates the daughter, then——"

"Hold it. If her aunt got the money, Deborah would get part of it."

"Not legally. She'd have to depend on her aunt's generosity. This way she'd get it all."

"The flaw is that May Carter is not the daughter."

"But maybe Deborah thought she was. More likely, though, May Carter was killed for what she knew. Either way it adds up to plenty of motive."

Rick found his pipe useful when he wanted to spar for time. He loaded it slowly. Midge watched him silently, and in the end Rick had to speak first.

"Now it's my turn to listen," Rick said. "Or does information go only one way?"

"It's no secret," Midge said. "It happened while Miss File was waiting for the subway train. She was standing on the downtown platform and there was quite a crowd—mostly Sunday visitors to the museum and Planetarium going home. When the train roared in, everybody pressed forward, like they always do. The train drowned out the shot. Miss File would have pitched off the platform in front of the wheels, but she hit up against a man standing in front of her. It wouldn't have made any difference; she was dead before she fell. The gun was shoved into her back and fired twice."

"And of course nobody saw anything?"

"OF COURSE. You know what happens in the subway when a train pulls in. And after Miss File fell, the confusion was ten times worse. People ran every which way and one woman fainted. We rounded up a flock of wit-

nesses who were standing all about Miss File, only they didn't witness anything but her falling. The train didn't go on; it stood there about ten minutes with the doors open. The killer could've walked up and down a couple of cars and calmly seated herself. Or, the way I figure it, she pretended that she'd got off a train and walked out to the street."

"Where did you find Deborah?"

"In Mrs. Monk's apartment. The dead woman's handbag told she was Brenda File, and I made it my business to find out where the File woman had stayed Friday night."

"After you read the *Courier-Express?*"

"Yeah. That story wasn't *all* bad. I went up to Mrs. Homer's place only half a block away and found Mrs. Homer asleep and Deborah File reading. She said she'd gone to Columbus Avenue to buy cigarettes and a magazine, and when she'd come back her aunt was gone. Like I said, she could have heard her aunt talking to you when she came back and followed her to the subway and given her the business. She can't prove she didn't."

Rick said: "It's up to you to prove she did."

"The witnesses in the subway are having a look at her. She's a girl people notice." Midge straightened his hat on his head without improving the shape. "Time we joined the party at headquarters. Everybody connected with the will is being rounded up. I even sent somebody out for Reuben Jones who was at Barr's place this afternoon. I figured I could learn something by having a private talk with you before Connell jumped on you. Let's go."

"Was the gun an Alkar?" Rick said.

"I doubt it. A .25 automatic. We found one of the two ejected shells on the subway platform. It had been stepped on, but I guess the markings weren't harmed, and the slugs in the body might be in good shape. Ballistics might have the report by now."

Rick waited at the door while Sergeant Midge used the phone.

"This is Midge, Mike. What about the File report? . . . Sure it was easy when I told you to concentrate on foreign guns. This killer doesn't like our local products. . . . So it wasn't Spanish. I only suggested to try Spanish guns first. . . Never mind the technical stuff. A broad resting mark across the primer is double-talk to me. What kind——"

"A Swiss Chylewski," Rick said from the door.

Midge glanced back at Rick and then gave a gentle little laugh into the mouthpiece. "Let me guess, Mike. Does a broad resting mark across the primer indicate that it's a .25 caliber Swiss Chylewski automatic pistol? . . . Yeah, I took a correspondence course. So long, Mike."

Midge hung up. "You made me sound smart, Rick. Do you own a Swiss Chylewski .25?"

"There's one in my trunk in my aunt's house."

"I thought so," Midge drawled. "By the way, did I tell you the man I sent to look in that trunk of yours found your Spanish Alkar there all right? It isn't the murder gun. Let's join the party."

CHAPTER XIII

The Police

THE catch of the dragnet was on the second floor district headquarters. Sander, a headquarters detective, lounged in the hall outside the detention room. Through the partly open door Rick could hear low voices.

"Eddie Mix is yelling for a mouthpiece, Sarge," Sander reported. "He

wants to use the phone. What'll I do?"

"Hold him off," Midge told him. "Maybe he didn't have time to cook up an alibi, and we don't want him to get word out. Did the Skipper get around to any of them yet?"

"He's still got the File girl in with him, parading witnesses in front of her now."

Rick said: "I want to see Deborah File. She's entitled to have somebody to advise her."

Midge's pale eyes lay flatly on Rick. "Don't crowd me, Rick. It won't pay. You wait in there till you're sent for."

Rick shrugged and went through the door. One voice dominated the detention room. Mrs. Ware sat primly in a chair with her little old face tilted up to Joe Barr who stood at her side.

"I've never been so insulted in my life," she was complaining. "I did not come all the way from Texas to be treated like a common criminal. Mr. Barr, I insist you do something. The idea that I would murder a woman!"

"You're not being accused," Barr tried to placate her. "They think you might be a witness."

She sniffed. "I told them and told them that I was in a moving picture theater after I left your rooms. Why, I never saw that woman in my life. The idea!" She folded her hands severely on her lap and glared about the room.

Nelda Ware stood on the other side of that chair, as if she and Joe Barr were guarding the woman between them. Nelda held herself stiffly, her arms straight down the way she had in Barr's apartment.

"So you're in it too, Ricky?" Barr said, grinning. The nervous tick still possessed his cheek and his grin was wan. Rick wondered if he was scared.

Reuben Jones turned from the window and looked at Rick as if he didn't see him. His wrinkled face was very tired and old, and Rick remembered that he had implied that once he had been in love with Miss Brenda File. Jones turned back to the window and stared down into the alley.

EDDIE MIX and Camilla Rogers were seated off by themselves on two chairs against each other. Camilla was wearing another one of those tight dresses plastered to her curves with half-sleeves to the elbows. Her hands were clasped over one raised knee and she was whispering urgently to Eddie Mix, who didn't appear to be listening to her. His smoldering black eyes were fixed on Rick and two pale spots appeared on his swarthy cheeks. Eddie Mix hadn't forgotten.

Sabina Felice completed the gathering. She had been pacing about the room, and when Barr had mentioned Rick's name she had stopped to look at Rick. Her lush body was more or less covered by a sports dress with long sleeves, but she was using her right hand to carry a cigarette up to her scarlet lips. There appeared to be nothing wrong with that arm.

She dropped her cigarette and stepped on it and undulated over to Rick and tucked a hand intimately through his arm. Rick gawked down at her red hair in surprise.

"I want to talk to you," she whispered, leading him to a corner of the room near the door.

Sander stuck his head into the room, looked around, and then withdrew it.

"Well?" Rick said.

"You're a reporter, aren't you?" She kept her voice low.

"How do you know? You never saw me before."

"I heard that guy call you Rick. I've heard of Rick Train." She leaned against him so that he felt her lushness. "I need help. They're ganging up on

me—the cops, everybody. I'll be rich soon. You won't lose by it."

Rick stood a step backward and was stopped by the wall. She clung relentlessly. Camilla snickered. Every eye in the room was on them.

"You got the inside track, Rick," Sabina said. "A guy like you can help me. I'll make it up to you, any way you want."

Rick squirmed under the sea of eyes he could see on him over her red head. He said: "Haven't you any shame? If I have to be vamped, I prefer it in private."

He said it too loud. They all heard him, and perhaps they had heard Sabina's whispers also.

"What do you expect?" Camilla commented bitterly. "She's just a cheap, broken-down tramp."

Sabina spun away from Rick and faced Camilla. "I've had enough out of you. I read in the papers what you said about me." She drew herself up. "At least nobody could ever say that I'm the mistress of a gangster."

Camilla screeched like a wildcat and shot out of her chair. Her blood-red nails hooked into slashing claws, and Sabina's voice joined hers as one cheek was laid open.

Reuben Jones came from the window, fast for a man his age; but when he passed Eddie Mix's chair, Mix was on his feet and had a hand thrust across Jones' chest.

"Let 'em be!" Eddie Mix clipped. His mouth was curiously tight and his black eyes glittered. Jones looked at him and didn't say anything, staying where he was.

Both women's voices turned into rasping sobs as they fought there in the middle of the room.

"Stop them!" Mrs. Ware shrilled. "Mr. Barr, why don't you separate those two hussies?"

Barr didn't move.

RICK, too, stayed where he was, watching those wildly thrashing arms with fascinated and detached interest. He was thinking that nobody who had been hit in the arm, or even nicked, by a .38 slug last night could possibly have been able to use the wounded arm that violently.

Sabina's superior weight was beginning to tell. She managed to secure both hands around Camilla's slender throat. Camilla tried to utter sounds and couldn't.

That was when Rick started for them, but Eddie Mix beat him to it. The woman had swayed and stumbled over to where Mix stood. He had only to reach out a hand and dig it into Sabina's red hair. He yanked. Sabina shrieked and released Camilla and threw her hands back over her head to try to tear the gangster's fingers away. Mix held on and cocked his free fist.

Rick was there when the blow started. He drove his shoulder against Eddie Mix. As Mix staggered away from the impact, Rick straightened up and planted his fist into the swarthy face. Eddie Mix fell backward against Reuben Jones and then sat down.

"Cut it out!" a voice ordered.

The room was filling with cops, in uniform and out, led by Detective Sander.

"What the hell's going on?" Sander demanded.

"That filthy gangster was going to hit me!" Sabina sobbed, wiping the blood from her cheek. "He was pulling my hair out by the roots."

"It's a lie!" Camilla screeched. "She was choking me."

"She ripped my cheek. Look!"

"Shut up, both of you!" Sander looked at Rick. "I saw you bop him."

"I had to take your job over," Rick

said, massaging his knuckles. "Isn't there ever a cop around when you need one? The women were battling and then Eddie Mix horned in and started to take a poke at the redhead."

"Hell, I just went to the can for a minute," Sander muttered.

Eddie Mix said suddenly: "Train, that's the second time you did that." He was still sitting on the floor, holding the side of his jaw. The quality of his voice frosted the room. "I don't forget."

A uniformed cop casually kicked Eddie Mix in the hip. "Keep your trap shut, mug," he advised.

Eddie Mix looked up at the cop. "I don't forget that either, copper."

The cop kicked him again, and Camilla flung herself at the cop. It started all over again. Sander threw himself at Camilla. A couple of cops yanked Eddie Mix up to his feet and held him. Mrs. Ware demanded that Joe Barr stop those madmen. Sabina Felice wailed that everybody was ganging up on her.

At the height of the confusion, Rick went out through the open door. He took the staircase up to the third floor and walked down the hall to a glazed door marked: HOMICIDE BUREAU.

ONLY one of the desks in the outer office was occupied. A fat plain-clothesman had his feet on the desk and was paring his fingernails with a penknife.

"Hello, Irv," Rick said. "How's the missus?"

"She'll be out of the hospital next week," Irv said. "What was that yelling downstairs?"

"Two of Anselm File's daughters got together."

Through an inner door Deborah File's voice came out, saying testily: "Will you you stop nagging me?" And Captain Connell growled: "This is murder, my girl. Do you understand that? Murder!"

"Boy, what a mess!" Irv said, intent on his thumbnail. "That's a nice-looking girl in there."

"Did any of the witnesses see her in the subway?"

"Nope. The Skipper practically begged them to recognize her, but no soap. That convinces me. Only a blind man would miss such an eyeful." Irv looked up. "You in deep, Rick?"

"Not very. Connell sent for me."

Irv nodded through the door through which the voices came. "The Skipper don't like you, Rick."

"I don't like him," Rick said.

Captain Connell was roaring: "Damn it, Miss File——" He stopped as the door swung in. His potbelly was draped on the desk over which he leaned toward Deborah. His dead cigar was angled savagely toward the ceiling.

A police stenographer sat at the corner of the desk, his pencil resting on the pad. On the other side of the room Sergeant Midge, his battered hat far back on his head, leaned indolently against a filing cabinet.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" Connell flung at Rick.

Rick paid no attention to him. He said to Deborah: "Do you want a lawyer?"

Her face, swinging toward him, was all eyes that had lost their luster. She sat with her hands twisting the bag on her lap.

"Lawyer?" she muttered. "Does that mean I'm arrested?"

"It means that you don't have to tell them a thing unless you have a lawyer with you. Connell should have told you."

The captain took his cigar out of his mouth and jabbed it at Rick. "You get out of here. I'll attend to you later."

"Have you booked her?" Rick asked.

"None of your damn business."

"Then I'll stay to advise her," Rick said pleasantly.

Connell turned his head. "Midge, throw him out."

Midge sighed and straightened up alongside the filing cabinet. Rick said, "I'm going," and strode over to Deborah's chair and took her hand. "You're coming with me, Debby."

CONNELL came around his desk fast. His face was the color of raw beef. "This tears it. I've stood enough from you."

Unobstructively Midge slipped between the captain and Rick. "Take it easy, Rick. We've got a right to question witnesses."

"You've got no right to star chamber proceedings."

Midge said mildly: "I like you, Rick, but sometimes you make me tired. I warned you not to crowd me. Now I'll make it so tough for you that——"

Connell brushed Midge aside. "I'll handle him, Midge. So you want to be a wise guy, Train. Okay. I'm booking her as a material witness. Now go run for a lawyer and get a writ."

Midge sighed again and slid away. His face looked mildly disgusted.

"On a Sunday?" Rick said. "Your cleverness sometimes startles me, Captain. You figure you'll have plenty of hours left to wear her down."

He led Deborah back to her chair. She moved listlessly at his side; her hand in his was limp and cold.

"You'll have to take it for a while longer, Debby," he told her when she was seated. "Probably spend the night in jail. It won't be pleasant for you, but the *Courier-Express* will like it. The columns are still open to me. Tomorrow the paper will carry more questions for Captain Harcourt Connell."

Behind him Connell said heavily: "You can't bulldoze me, Train."

Rick continued talking to Deborah. "For instance, the *Courier-Express* will ask: Deborah File is being held as a material witness to what? What did she witness? She wasn't in the subway, as all the witnesses in the subway testified. The police can't place her anywhere during the crime except in Mrs. Homer's apartment, where she had every right to be, or maybe walking back from Columbus Avenue where she bought a pack of cigarettes. She's less a witness than any of the bystanders in the subway. And there will be another question. Is Captain Harcourt Connell attempting to divert attention from his fumbling of the murder of May Carter, as exposed in yesterday's *Courier-Express*, by jumping on a poor girl who is grief-stricken over the murder of her aunt who since childhood has been a mother to her?"

Deborah's eyes, looking up at him, glistened with tears. Relentlessly Rick went on: "And a third question. Does Captain Harcourt Connell's inept conduct of this case justify the rumor that he is slated for promotion to inspector?"

RICK turned then. Connell was back behind his desk, seated in his swivel-chair and putting a match to his cigar. He said without passion: "I'll tear your heart out, Train."

The stenographer hastily wiped a smile from the corners of his mouth.

Midge drawled: "There's no sense getting hot under the collar, Rick. For your own safety, you want to find the murderer as much as we do. All we want to do is to finish questioning her."

"With me in the room," Rick said.

"I guess that'll be all right." He looked at Connell.

"Don't think I'm falling for your blackmail, Train," Connell growled. "I

was going to send for you next anyway, and we're practically through with her."

Midge found a wall to lean against. "Now let's return to Friday night, Miss File."

"I told you," Deborah said dully. "I visited my friend Julia Finkel in Greenwich Village. I left at about eleven and went straight home—that is, to Mrs. Homer's."

"Are you sure of the time?"

"It might have been later or earlier. I didn't look at my watch. Perhaps Julia will know."

"I had her on the phone," Midge said. "She thinks it was around a quarter after. What time did you reach Mrs. Homer's apartment?"

"Twenty minutes or half an hour later, I imagine."

Connell smote his desk. "That could bring you out of the subway at eleven-forty-five, when May Carter was shot across the street."

Nothing changed in Deborah's face. "Then it must have been earlier. There was no commotion of any sort when I got out of the subway."

"Was your aunt up when you entered the apartment?" Midge asked.

"She was in the living room with Mrs. Homer. I was tired, so I went to bed after a few minutes."

"Did you sleep through the night?"

"Of course. I——" She frowned up at Midge. "You mean, did I wake up? Yes, twice. Once the phone woke me. I heard Auntie answer it and fell asleep again. Some time later I heard Auntie moving about the room. Mrs. Homer's spare room has twin beds. I asked her if she was feeling well and she said she couldn't sleep and would sit up for a while. Then I dropped off again until morning."

Rick felt suddenly fine. He observed: "She couldn't have tried to run me over Friday night at about the time she left Julia Finkel's place in the Village, and she didn't have a car."

Midge shrugged. "Could be that first attempt was simply sheer accident, by a woman in a coupe who had nothing to do with the rest?"

"All right then. But the fact remains she could hardly have made the mysterious phone call to her aunt at twelve-thirty if she had been in the apartment asleep at the time."

"There's only her word for it," Connell said. "Midge, have Mrs. Homer brought in."

"She can't walk a block," Midge told him. "Besides I started a nervous breakdown when I broke the news of Miss File's death to her and she had to be carried into a neighbor's apartment. I'll send Irv to check up with her."

THEN it was Rick's turn. He went over the ground he had covered with Midge. Connell slouched in his swivel-chair and chewed his cigar to shreds and hardly did more than grunt at the parts when he should have flared up. Evidently he had already heard it all from Midge, though ordinarily that wouldn't have made any difference. Rick felt a little sorry for him.

Presently Connell said wearily: "Okay, beat it, both of you. But stick around where I can get you when I want you. Where'll you be staying, Miss File?"

"I don't know." She looked lost and very much alone. "I couldn't stand going home and Mrs. Homer will probably go to her sister's in Brooklyn. I suppose I'll spend the night with Julia Finkel."

Rick took her arm and they went out. As they walked down the stairs, they met Barr coming up with Detective Sander.

"Hi, kids," Barr said. "The inquisitors are dusting off the rack for

me. Did they give you a bad time, Debby?"

She tossed her head and descended the stairs ahead of Rick. He was going after her when Sander caught his arm.

"Watch out for Eddie Mix," Sander said. "That left of your was too good for his disposition."

"It was a right," Barr said. "Very nice. You beat me to it, Ricky."

Rick ran his eyes over Barr's athletic body. "Did I? I didn't notice that you budged an inch."

"You were too fast for me," Barr said evenly. "No doubt you know that Eddie Mix is poison."

"That's what he is—poison," Sander agreed heartily. I remember once——"

Rick ran down the stairs to catch up to Deborah.

He took her to the nearest restaurant. Neither of them had much appetite. They ordered coffee and cake.

"Did your aunt tell you about the girl phoning her Friday?" Rick asked.

She shook her head.

"Something happened today to make your aunt sure who the murderer was," Rick persisted. "Have you any idea what it was?"

"Please, Rick." Her voice was toneless. "I can't take any more. Will you take me to a movie? It might sound like a queer request, but I'd like to go where I can get my mind off murder."

They went into the first theater they passed, after Rick had made sure that no mystery was on the double feature. Deborah kept her eyes on the screen, but he was sure she didn't see anything. After a while he reached for her hand and held it. She let it lie there. Slowly he felt the coldness leave her fingers.

IT WAS ten-thirty when they were on the street again. They had to pass police headquarters on the way to the subway, and Sergeant Midge was coming out.

"Through in there?" Rick asked him.

"For tonight," Midge said. His shoulders slumped, accentuating his frailness. "By the way, Miss File, Mrs. Homer corroborates you were in bed from twelve on. So you're all right there, though you could have an accomplice who phoned your aunt." He added quickly as she opened her mouth: "I'm a cop. I'm supposed to think of everything, so don't get sore. Leave that to Rick."

"I wasn't sore," Rick said. "I just didn't care for Connell's technique."

Midge's eyes crinkled. "You're lucky, Rick. Too bad the Skipper didn't let me handle you. No hard feelings, though."

Rick changed the subject. "How were the alibis?"

"The usual things. Some with and some without and none of them meaning much. Mrs. Ware was in the movies—she says. Joe Barr and Nelda Ware stayed in his apartment, so they alibi each other, for what that's worth. Eddie Mix and Camilla Rogers were at a party all last night and in bed till four this afternoon—another alibi depending on each other. Sabina Felice was drinking highballs with a two-bit gambler. He backs her up, but maybe he would anyway. Reuben Jones was riding up and down Fifth Avenue on top of a bus. He says he's crazy about that."

"He is." Deborah said.

"Yeah. Well, I don't see how he fits in anyway. We just picked him up on principle."

Rick didn't comment.

Midge dug a watch out of his vest. "Well, I've got to be getting some sleep. Haven't had any since Friday and I'm leaving for Florida tomorrow moning."

Rick's eyes lifted. "Palm City?"

"Your tip was good, Rick. It didn't

take long for the answer to come from Palm City. The sheriff knew May Carter personally. She worked in a juke joint in Palm City up to a week ago. Well, good-night."

When they reached the door of Julia Finkel's apartment in Greenwich Village, Deborah put out a hand.

"I'm sorry, Rick," she said.

"For what?" he asked in surprise.

"For the way I treated you. I realize now you were just trying to help Auntie and me."

He shook his head. "I'd like to believe it, but I don't. I was scared of my own skin and still am."

"But you ran a risk when you stopped the policemen from bullying me."

"Oh, that?" he said. "As a kid I was scared of policemen. That's why I throw my weight around with them whenever I can."

She kept holding his hand and looked up at him in the dim hall. Life had flowed back into her tan face and dark eyes. He had a strong yearning to suggest that she ask him in, but downed it.

"I'll be seeing you," he said and left. He was in a hurry to get his hands on a timetable.

CHAPTER XIV

The Train

THE GIRL'S back was familiar, though one could never go by that. Rick hurried across Pennsylvania Station to catch up to her. She carried a light overnight bag, not much bigger than the one in his own hand.

As she skirted the information desk, she glanced up at the clock and her profile showed. It was a fine profile in spite of the fact that it was topped by a weird hat that perched precariously on her curls. She headed for the ticket windows, and Rick turned aside toward the track where his train waited.

He was waiting for her at the head of the track gate when she appeared.

"Did the idea occur to you only this morning?" Rick said. "I bought my ticket on the way home last night."

Deborah File stopped walking and put down her bag.

"Rick! Don't tell me you're going to Palm City too?"

"I hear the climate is something." He lifted her bag in his free hand. "This is a break. I was expecting a lonely journey."

When they were settled in the Pullman, Deborah said: "Rick, what about the Army?"

"I'm not deserting. I've got four days left—rather, about three and a half. I can spend twenty-four hours in Palm City."

"What do you expect to find there?"

"The same thing you do," he said.

She frowned. "But I don't know. It wasn't more than an impulse. I stayed up most of the night thinking about it. Then early this morning I made up my mind. It seems to me that Palm City and New York are the focal points of the whole mess. I mean, Uncle Anselm wrote the letters to Palm City, and May Carter came from there and so did Sabina Felice."

"If none of those three women is the daughter, the money goes to you, you know."

"Yes, that's important," she said. "I won't pretend that I don't want the money, if I'm entitled to it."

"So you don't believe that Nelda Ware is your cousin?"

The train started to move. She looked out of the window at the vanishing station so long that Rick thought she did not want to answer. Then she said: "Can one believe anything any more? It's all mixed up. I think it's my duty to go to Palm City—to protect my in-

terest. You see, I can't trust anybody."

"Because you trusted Joe Barr and he doublecrossed you?"

"That's only part of it."

"And you don't trust me," Rick said. It wasn't a question.

She shook her head. "I'd like to, but you're on your own completely. I suppose we all are. You're angry. You don't care who gets in the way of your anger, I or the police or anybody. I learned that Saturday night in my room and again yesterday in the police station. And, of course, you don't trust me. May I see one of your papers?"

HE HAD two and passed one to her. For a while they read in silence. The murder of Brenda File and the discovering of May Carter's identity and the appearance of a third claimant to the daughtership were crowding the war news. Even the sainted New York *Times* gave it a one-column lead in the upper left corner of page one and two additional columns and a photo of Nelda Ware on an inside page.

"So that's how you stay in New York?" a voice said.

They looked up from their papers. Sergeant Midge stood little and meek and shabby above them. His pale eyes were vaguely annoyed.

"Have a seat," Rick invited.

Midge sat down. His hat was rolled into a cylinder sticking out of his pocket. He looked at Deborah.

"I expect something like this from Rick," he said. "He has a notion he's his own law. But I'm surprised at you, Miss File."

"I didn't know I was being imprisoned in New York," she retorted.

"New York is a big place, Miss File. You could hardly call it a concentration camp. If we were back there, I'd find some law even Rick couldn't get around and toss you both in jail. You see, I don't care what Rick writes about me. I have no ambition."

The train had pulled into Newark.

"But here you have no jurisdiction," Rick said.

"That's right. Well, let's make the best of it." Midge crossed his legs. He wore white cotton socks and the tops of them showed. "By the way, Miss File, I hear that Joe Barr is a friend of yours. He's a pretty good shamus, but I wouldn't want my daughter to know a guy like that."

A flush tinged her tanned cheeks, then ebbed. She laughed without mirth. "You're making the same mistake Rick did. I hired Joe Barr to find my uncle's daughter."

"I see." Midge sighed. "You thought your uncle's lawyer and the newspapers weren't doing enough. You were so anxious to make sure that neither your aunt nor you would inherit all that money that you paid out good money to find the rightful heir."

Rick was busy with his pipe, not looking at either of them.

Deborah's flush returned. "You don't believe me?"

"Do you expect me to?" Midge said.

Rick got his pipe to draw. "Tell him to go to hell, Debby. We're in New Jersey. He's just another citizen like us."

"I've nothing to hide," Deborah said. "I didn't hire Joe Barr to find her—not exactly. A week or two after Uncle's will was made public, I met Joe Barr at a party. I knew him casually. We discussed the will. He said that if no daughter existed, as Auntie and I believed at the time, it was important to prove it. Or if she were dead, to prove that. Otherwise the inheritance would be held up for years without Auntie getting it even though it might be rightfully hers."

"So Barr was also working for your

aunt?" Midge said without emotion.

"No. She wouldn't hear of hiring him or anybody else."

"Because she was afraid that all Barr would do would be to find the real heiress?"

"I suppose so," Deborah replied frankly. "What little money Auntie had had was practically gone. She thought she was entitled to at least a part of her brother's fortune. It seemed to me that the sensible thing was to find out exactly how the matter stood, so I went ahead and hired Joe Barr anyway. I don't want Auntie to know. That was why I met him in secret—like Saturday night. After Camilla Rogers appeared, I asked him to come over and discuss the matter with him, and I arranged to meet him in back of the yard."

SHE looked defiantly at Rick with lifted chin. "We stood close together among the trees because we spoke in whispers."

Rick felt a warm glow spread over him. "I ought to be kicked," he said.

"What made me so mad at Joe Barr wasn't that he turned up the heiress," Deborah went on. "I'm mad because of the sneaky way he did it. He was working for me. He might have let me know first. When I saw him Saturday night, he didn't mention a word about Nelda Ware and Mrs. Ware to me, although he had already brought them to New York. And I wouldn't be surprised if Nelda Ware is as much a fraud as the other two."

"That's a shamus for you," Midge said with distaste. "He'll get a much bigger cut from Nelda Ware than he could have from you. By that I mean I'm impressed by Nelda Ware and he'll get paid off plenty when she inherits. Mrs. Ware's testimony will be very convincing to the court."

Rick said: "If you want to be impressed, be impressed by Sabina Felice's letters from Anselm File, or by Camilla Roger's documents and the facts that she has convinced Reuben Jones."

"Could be." Midge stood up. "I hate to horn in on young folks." He meandered lazily toward the next car.

Deborah looked after him. "If I were a criminal, I'd be terribly afraid of him."

"He's not a bad guy, though," Rick said. "For a cop."

DEBORAH dipped the shrimp into sauce and brought it up to her mouth. The fork paused at her chin. Her face showed distaste.

"Anything wrong with the shrimp?" Rick asked. "Mine's fine."

Then he saw Joe Barr and Nelda Ware move past the table in single file. Grinning, Barr made a saluting gesture. Nelda, directly behind him, was busy patting her peroxide hair in place. They sat down at a table on the opposite side of the dining car.

Rick turned completely in his seat and looked back at Sergeant Midge, who was sitting alone at a table near the entrance to the dining car. Midge appeared to be absorbed in his food.

"So that's why Midge started the conversation about Joe Barr!" Rick said. "He knew Barr was on the train."

Deborah had got the shrimp into her mouth. She chewed it without pleasure. "It should be obvious to him that we didn't came together."

"A cop doesn't believe in the obvious," Rick said. "Sometimes people who are together don't want to appear to be together."

Vehemently she impaled a shrimp on her fork. As if, Rick thought, it were the body of Joe Barr. She said: "I think Joe Barr is the only man I ever

really hated. He's contemptible."

Nelda Ware, having given her order to the waiter, stood up and came toward their table. That awkwardness of movement, with the arms held stiffly, had not left her. Perhaps she was always like that.

"Hello," Nelda said. "Look, Miss File, we're cousins. I guess you're the only relative I got in the world."

"What are you after?" Deborah said, without hostility, but without friendliness either.

"Why can't we be friends?"

"Not while you're with Joe Barr."

"He don't mean a thing to me," Nelda said, keeping her voice low. "Except I owe him something. He found my mother—my foster mother—and she told him where he could find me, and he did and told me there's lots of money waiting for me. I have to stick with him till all this is settled, don't I?"

Deborah was studying her as only one woman can study another. "The courts have to decide whether you're my cousin."

"Sure, I know. But I mean, you're not sore? I mean, because I'm getting the money?"

"Not if you're entitled to the money."

"Oh, but I am."

"That remains to be seen." And Deborah returned to her food.

Rick caught that flash of hardness he had seen yesterday cross Nelda's baby features. She shrugged awkwardly and without another word returned to her table.

"I don't think I care for her," Deborah said.

Rick nodded abstractedly. He had little to say during the rest of the meal. He was watching Joe Barr and Nelda eat. Twice Rick turned in his seat and saw that Sergeant Midge was watching them too.

WHEN Rick entered the lounge car late in the afternoon, he found Joe Barr and Nelda Ware seated opposite each other at the end table. The car was filled, mostly with Army officers returning to Florida camps.

"Join us," Barr invited.

Rick sat down at Barr's left and told the waiter that he wanted a Rum Collins.

"Isn't Debby drinking?" Barr asked.

"No."

Barr's arm brushed Rick's shoulder as he raised his glass. "What's she got against me, Rick?"

"You should know."

"Oh, hell!" Barr said. "She hired me to find out about the daughter. So I did. It would've been unethical to hold out on Nelda that she had all that dough coming to her."

"So that's it?" Rick said. "You're ethical."

Nelda Ware leaned over the table toward Rick. "I don't like her, even if she's my cousin." The soft Southern accent was husky with too much whiskey. "She's stuck up."

"Debby's all right when you get to know her." Barr leered sideways at Rick. "Eh, Rick?"

Rick made an effort to keep his temper in check. There was no point in creating a rumpus here on the train. He changed the subject. "The File money is in New York, not Palm City."

"But there's something cooking in Palm City," Barr said. "That's why you and Debby are on the way there. It's my job to protect Nelda's interests. As soon as I read in the paper that May Carter came from Palm City, I phoned Nelda and told her to meet me in Penn Station."

"Hardly gave me a chance to change my clothes," Nelda said.

"Why worry, if your case is good?" Rick said.

Barr smiled. "The best case is good only if you protect it. I like to keep on my toes. What I'm especially interested in is those letters Sabina Felice has. And the possible tie-up between May Carter and Sabina Felice and the letters. So far, all we know is that Palm City connects them. What else?"

"And you didn't trust Nelda to stay out of your sight, so you dragged her with you," Rick said. Over his lifted glass he saw Nelda frown at him. "You should have brought Mrs. Ware also."

"You're full of ideas, aren't you?" Barr said.

Rick put down his empty glass. "Lots of them," he agreed and started out of the car.

"Give my regards to Debby," Barr called after him.

Rick didn't answer.

SERGEANT MIDGE was sitting opposite Deborah. Rick could tell, as he walked down the car toward them, that Midge wasn't being a detective at the moment. Deborah's oval face was relaxed and somewhat amused as she listened to him.

"He's been telling me about his experiences in the last war," Deborah said to Rick. "Anyway, about the funny ones. He was a sergeant also in the Army."

"I'm afraid I'm the kind of guy who'll go through life being a sergeant whatever he does," Midge said. "Can I have a word with you, Rick?"

Deborah's face tensed. Rick could feel her eyes on them as he and Midge stepped to the end of the car.

Midge tapped Rick under the left shoulder. "So you're still carrying iron. That's smart. Miss File tells me Nelda Ware come to your table to make friends. Did Barr send her?"

"I'd bet on it."

"Couldn't it have been for our benefit—yours and mine? To show us that she's really sore at Barr?"

"So you don't believe Debby's story about her dealings with Barr?"

Midge's mouth lifted at the corners. "I find I get along best in my job by not believing anybody, not even a pair of very pretty eyes. Anyway, be careful."

"I try to be," Rick said.

Those very pretty eyes were questioning Rick when he returned to his seat.

"More police business?" Deborah asked dryly.

"Nothing important," he said.

She turned her head to look at the poles flashing by and the flat country beyond. Her profile, topped by her touseled curls, was framed by the window. He sat looking at her, feeling warm and cold at the same time.

ABRUPTLY Rick was wide awake. Flat on his back he lay in his lower berth, listening to the ceaseless rhythm of the wheels beneath him, listening to another sound, closer, that was less than sound. Somebody was breathing heavily almost in his ear.

It couldn't be the soldier in the upper berth. He was snoring placidly. Rick pushed his head across the pillow closer to the curtain of his berth. The ragged inhaling and exhaling of breath was on the other side of the curtain. Like somebody who had been running or was frightened or was laboring for courage.

Rick's hand slipped under his pillow and closed over the comforting hardness of his revolver. The curtain stirred, as if somebody had brushed against it while passing, but there was no sound of footsteps.

Rick pulled the gun all the way out and propped himself up on one elbow and waited. He left the light on.

Deborah File and Nelda Ware were both in this car—Deborah in Lower Three and Nelda at the other end in Lower Eleven. He himself was in Lower Eight, opposite their berths and between them. Joe Barr was in one of the other cars.

The wheels made too much noise and so did the snoring soldier. Now that Rick was listening with every nerve alert, he could no longer tell whether anybody was in the aisle. There was an easy way to find out. He yanked the curtain aside.

The aisle was silent and empty.

He looked at his wristwatch. It was exactly two-thirty, which meant they were still in South Carolina. He called himself a jittery sap and dropped back on his pillow.

He dreamed that a woman was leaning over him. He tried to see her face and could not, although it was only inches above his own. And suddenly she screamed, and he awoke, and she was still screaming.

Then the scream cut off and other voices took up—not loud, but bewildered, questioning. It took that long for Rick to realize that he was really awake. He yanked open the curtain. Heads were sticking out of berths. A Negro porter was running down the aisle.

"Here!" a man shouted. "Down here in this berth."

It was the last berth across the aisle. Nelda's berth.

In his pajamas Rick slipped into the aisle. The curtain of Lower Eleven flew apart; Nelda's white face appeared.

"You all right?" the porter asked her.

She gasped: "Somebody—— A hand——" Then she saw Rick and cowered back in terror.

She was sitting up. The cover was off her and the nightgown she wore was sleeveless. Rick thought first to look at her arms. There was no wound, no bandage.

THEN Sergeant Midge came out of nowhere, shoving Rick roughly aside. He was still fully dressed. The Pullman conductor was with him and more porters were streaming into the car.

Rick looked up and saw Deborah standing just outside the women's washroom, not ten feet away. She was very lovely in a pure white robe that clung to her slim body and contrasted sharply with the dark of her eyes and hair. He got only a flash of her before a porter blocked her out.

His watch said two-forty.

Midge's head was stuck into the berth. Rick heard him say: "You're all right. It's just a scratch."

Rick pressed close to Midge. Nelda had lifted her nightgown over her thigh. There was a shallow gash in the full white flesh.

"The pain woke me up," Nelda whimpered. "I saw the knife and the hand in front of my eyes. Then I screamed and the hand disappeared."

"Did you see anybody?" Midge asked.

"Just the hand and the knife. It came in through the curtain." Nelda looked around. "Where's Joe?"

"If he's in his berth, he's still two cars away," Midge said. "I'll send for him."

Midge spoke to the conductor, who dispatched a porter for Barr. Evidently he knew that Midge was a detective and seemed glad of it, even though Midge had no official status outside of New York.

Rick returned to his berth. The aisle was in a tumult. The porters were keeping the passengers back from Nelda's berth. Rick turned and saw Midge stop and pick something up from the

She drew back her nightgown, revealing a long narrow knife wound in her thigh

aisle. It looked like a knife.

In his berth, Rick pulled on his pants and shoes. Now Deborah and Sabina Felice and Camilla Rogers and Nelda Ware were all accounted for—anyway, as far as wounded arms were concerned. It was barely possible that he wasn't as good a shot as he thought.

He could hear the Pullman conductor announcing that the young woman had screamed as the result of a nightmare, and would everybody please return to sleep. Rick left his berth and persuaded a porter that he let him through on the grounds that his girl friend in Lower Three might be nervous. Joe Barr, his athletic body covered only by pajamas, was talking to Midge and the conductor.

Rick weaved through the still milling passengers in the opposite direction. Deborah was seated on her berth with her elbows on her knees.

"Isn't it awful?" she said. "Who could have done it?"

"Did you pass my berth about ten minutes ago?"

"Why, yes," she said coolly. "I went to the washroom."

"You didn't stop at my berth?"

She frowned up at him. "I wonder what that question is supposed to mean?"

"Possibly you want to tell me something," he suggested.

"No. Anything I have to say could wait till morning."

Sergeant Midge was moving toward them. "Would you two mind coming into the dining car?"

"If we did mind, there's nothing you could do about it in this state," Rick said.

Midge sighed. "Some day I'm going to kick your pants for you. No, there's nothing I could do. Will you come?"

"Sure," Rick said. He extended a hand to Deborah.

JOE BARR and Nelda and the Pullman conductor and the train conductor were already in the deserted dining car. Nelda, her face drawn, was leaning back against the chair in which she sat, while Barr stood beside her with an arm about her shoulders. Rick and Deborah seated themselves at a table.

"I've no jurisdiction," Midge said. "So you don't have to answer my questions. These two gentlemen"—he nodded toward the conductors—"asked me to cooperate." He faced Deborah. "Where were you at the time of the assault?"

She hesitated, and for a moment Rick was afraid she would say that she had been asleep in her berth. Midge never missed seeing anything.

"In the washroom," Deborah said.

Joe Barr laughed derisively. "Sure you were. You were back there before Nelda finished screaming."

Deborah was on her feet, her fists clenched. Her anger set her fine eyes on fire. "You're contemptible!"

"Is that the best you can do, Debby?" Barr mocked her. "Why don't you put a knife in me, or a bullet? That's your style."

Rick stood up. Midge shoved Rick back with one hand and slid a shoulder between Barr and Deborah. "Let's not lose our heads," he advised mildly.

"Don't kid me, Sarge. I wouldn't be surprised if Debby was paying you off. I never yet knew a cop who——"

"Barr," Midge said softly.

"Well, look at the facts," Barr persisted. "Who has to gain by this? Debby thinks May Carter is the daughter and kills her. Then she does the same to her aunt. She finds out that she made a mistake about May Carter and that Nelda is really the daughter, so she tries one more job. She was in the best position to knife Nelda."

"It could have been you," Rick suggested.

Barr swung toward him. "So that's the way you'll play it? Well, I was asleep two cars away."

"Can you prove it?"

"I don't have to."

The two conductors listened excitedly. Midge stepped in again.

"Barr's clear. He couldn't have gone two cars forward and then back without being seen by a porter."

"What about the knife?" Rick asked.

"So you saw me pick it up?" Midge shrugged. "It's a steak knife, swiped from the dining car during the meal. No prints; I looked it over. The killer probably had a handkerchief wrapped around the hilt. She"—he caught himself on the pronoun—"or maybe he, dropped it beside Miss Ware's berth."

"Or it was a blanket wrapped around the knife," Rick said quietly, "and then it was tossed out of a berth."

ONE at a time they got his meaning. Midge first, who smiled a little as if by now it was a stale idea to him. Then Barr, who took his arm away from Nelda's shoulders and looked down at her in wonder. Then Deborah, who half-opened her mouth and kept it that way.

Finally Nelda herself. The hardness leaped into her face—the third time Rick had seen it there. "What do you mean by that crack?"

Midge answered for him. "He means that the wound might have been self-inflicted."

"You mean me stab myself? Am I crazy?"

"Not crazy and not clever," Rick said. "You make up a yarn about an attack and then prick yourself with the knife. That's to take suspicion off you."

"What suspicion?" she demanded.

Barr looked obviously worried. He ran a hand through his hair and said: "Rick's having another of his brainstorms. Nelda doesn't have to go in for killings. She's entitled to the money under the law."

Wearily Midge nodded. "Rick's idea is an idea. So is yours about Miss File, Barr. So are a couple of others chasing around my brain." He looked at the train conductors. "I told you I couldn't accomplish anything. You better call the South Carolina police in."

"This is a hell of a note," the conductor growled.

"Wait a minute," Barr said. "Does that mean we'll be taken off the train?"

"That depends on the local police. They'll probably want you all as witnesses."

Rick and Joe Barr exchanged glances. Rick found himself the spokesman for the four of them.

"We started out for Palm City and prefer to get there in the morning. As a matter of fact, a mistake has been made. Nelda screamed because she had a nightmare about a hand reaching into her berth. She scratched her thigh with a nail file. She doesn't know a thing about the knife in the aisle. Isn't that so, Nelda?"

She looked at Barr and he nodded to her. So Nelda nodded also.

The Pullman conductor simpered. Midge said without interest: "This isn't my business. If the conductors want to make a fuss, it's up to them."

The conductors obviously did not.

Deborah's hand slipped into Rick's as they walked back to their car. The flesh of it was cold against his.

CHAPTER XV

Palm City

PALM CITY was the kind of scrubby inland resort town that only maps

and timetables made impressive. It had grown suddenly with no plan and little reason—a cheap winter haven for those who could not afford the luxuries and high prices of the coastal Florida cities. And now gas rationing, plus the fact that it was still the tag-end of autumn, made it a ghost town.

Only five passengers got off the train at Palm City. The clammy heat hit Rick as he alighted from the air-conditioned car. He gave Deborah a hand off the steps and gathered up both their bags.

Sergeant Midge had been the first one off. He stood near the unpainted shack that was the station room, talking to a man a head taller than himself and twice as broad. They turned to watch Joe Barr and Nelda Ware, each carrying a bag, move across the cinder platform and disappear around a corner of the shack. Then they completed the turn to where Rick and Deborah stood and the big man waved a bare, brawny arm.

"Well, well, Rick Train!" the big man called heartily. He came forward and put a huge paw in Rick's hand.

Rick said, "This is Deborah File. Debby—Sheriff Don Holt, the best shot in the country."

Sheriff Holt swept off his broad-brimmed hat. Deborah blinked at him in wonder in the hot sunlight. His khaki shirt was open at the throat and his sleeves were rolled up over forearms the size of hams. A Colt revolver sagged in an ammunition belt. He could have stepped out of a Wild West adventure story.

"Second best shot," Holt told Deborah genially.

Sergeant Midge, over-burdened in that climate by his shapeless, shaggy tweed suit, stood insignificantly beside the sheriff's bulk. "So you know Rick?"

"Know him?" Holt said in a roar that was his natural voice. "Met him first in the South Atlantic shooting matches. In Savannah that was. I scored a 196 in the Center-fire Rapid-fire match. That was pretty good shooting, wasn't it?"

"I wouldn't know," Midge said.

"Good enough to tie the world record," Holt boomed. "Then along came Rick, and what do you think he shot?"

The sheriff paused and looked from face to face. Neither Deborah nor Midge seemed to want to hazard a guess.

"Rick here scored 197. A new world record! And that ain't all. At twenty-five yards he shot thirty-eight consecutive tens! And I thought I could shoot!"

"You can," Rick said.

"Sure, but not when Rick Train is around. You and the young lady staying in town for a while? I got a fine shooting range in back of my house."

It was obvious that the sheriff hadn't yet got the low-down from Midge.

"I'm leaving tomorrow," Rick said.

SERGEANT MIDGE reached up to pluck Holt's sleeve. "I have business to attend to."

"Sure. We'll be going." Holt shook Rick's hand again. "Come around and see me before you leave. Maybe we can give our guns a little use on my range. Bring the young lady too. Have you got a place to spend the night?"

"Not yet," Rick said.

"Try Mrs. Yard's cabins. Nice and clean. Tell her I sent you." The broad-brimmed hat swept off again. "Pleasure to meet you, Miss."

Deborah stared after the sheriff's bulk swinging toward the road with gun-belting joggling and Midge having to hurry to keep pace with him.

"Is he real?" Deborah asked.

"Very," Rick said.

The only conveyance in town was a battered taxi in which a tattered, unshaven man drowsed. He seemed to resent being awakened, grudgingly he drove them the mile to their destination.

Mrs. Yard's cabin court consisted of eight gleaming white cabins cooking under the sun. They were arranged in a horseshoe about a court covered by wilted patches of grass. In the center of the court two sickly cocoanut palms struggled for survival in a climate a couple of hundred miles too far north. Hibiscus covered the railing of the tiny porch in front of each cabin. A lime tree completed the tropical effect.

A strapping middle-aged woman in shorts came to meet them. Any friend of Don Holt's, Mrs. Yard said, was a friend of hers. She showed them to adjoining single cabins.

When Rick had his door closed, he stripped off his dusty, clammy clothes and got under the stall shower in the bathroom. For a long time he let the tepid water flow over him. He dressed in slacks and sport shirt; he got into his shoulder-clip and had to wear a jacket to cover it. Then he went out. As soon as the sun hit him, he was hot all over again.

Mrs. Yard was talking to three men in front of the double cabins. All three might have been cut of one pattern—ungainly, tense, wearing hats with brims furiously snapped and jackets cut too tightly.

Rick went up to the door of Deborah's cabin and knocked. There was no answer.

"She just left," Mrs. Yard called across the court. She came over to him, her muscular legs and thighs rippling as she walked.

"Went where?" Rick asked.

"I saw her go up the road toward town." Mrs. Yard searched his face, looking for anger or something of similar interest. She found nothing at all.

"Did you know May Carter?" he asked casually.

"I guess you read about the poor girl in the papers," Mrs. Yard said. "When I read in the Jax paper this morning that she was murdered in New York, I felt right bad. I'll say I knew May. Not her so good, but her father. Steve Carter. Died about ten years ago. He was an awful nice man; May wasn't over fifteen then. She went to work in the Orange Grove in town and worked there till she left."

"Did she leave recently?"

"Couldn't have been earlier than a week ago Saturday night. I was there for a little beer and dancing, and May was serving tables like always. And then she goes to New York and is killed. Isn't it a terrible thing?"

"She was a plump girl, wasn't she?" Rick said.

"Who—May? Thin as a rail. All bones. And a complexion she couldn't do a thing with. May Carter was a decent girl, though—I'll tell you that."

THE three men across the court straggled into a double cabin and closed the door. They had come in a sleek sedan which was parked in the court.

"I met a woman who used to live in Palm City," Rick said. "Her name is Sabina Felice."

Mrs. Yard's face showed distaste. "Sabina stayed in one of my cabins last winter. And the goings on! Every night a party." She leaned confidentially toward Rick; beads of sweat stood out on her upper lip. "Now I don't mind people having a little fun in my cabins—that's their business, not mine, if you know what I mean. But all the others in the cabins complained they couldn't sleep nights with all the

noise in Sabina's cabin. So after two weeks I told her to get out."

"Where did she go?"

Mrs. Yard shrugged. "Tampa, I heard. She always said she was an actress. If you ask me, any acting she did wasn't with much clothes on." She stopped in confusion. "But I oughtn't be talking like this about a friend of yours."

"She isn't my friend," Rick said. "Did she come back to Palm City?"

"I saw her around town a few months later. They say she was boarding with Mrs. Reeves. I don't suppose Mrs. Reeves would stand for any parties. She was a quiet, decent girl. A widow. Pat Reeves died a couple of years ago. He was such an awful nice young man. Then Mrs. Reeves died a little while ago—both of them dying so young. They say it was cancer, but I'll always say it was a broken heart."

"Were May Carter and Sabina Felice friends?"

Mrs. Yard laughed scornfully. "A decent girl like May Carter?"

"But they must have known each other."

"Everybody knows everybody in Palm City. Especially in the summer when there's nobody around. And May was Mrs. Reeve's closest friend, and Sabina boarded there for a while. But that's all. I never saw those two together."

Rick loaded his pipe and looked around the court. "The season doesn't seem to have started yet."

"It never seems to start," Mrs. Yard said glumly. "They always say it will get better later on, but it never does. Now the war and no gas and everything. Would you believe it, every one of my cabins has been empty for eight days? Then today, in one hour, I rent two singles to you and that pretty girl and a double to those three men."

"Are those men regular customers of yours?"

"Them?" she snorted. "Trash! They say they came from Miami and maybe they was down there, but I can tell Northern trash. I don't mean," she added hastily, "gentlemen like you, but they're trash if ever I seen any. It's not my business, though. They paid in advance."

Rick said, "Well, I'll have a look around," and started toward the road. He saw no point in telling Mrs. Yard that at least two of those three men showed the bulges of guns under their tight jackets.

A DELIVERY truck gave Rick a lift to the heart of the city. The business section consisted of two blocks of stores, half of them closed until the winter, sprawled sparsely across the highway from the railroad. What ghosts remained in the flat sun-baked town were asleep and determined to remain that way.

The Orange Grove was, of course, a juke joint. The interior was dim and drowsy. Two men in overalls sat at the counter drinking a prodigious number of cokes. One kidded with the droopy waitress, while the other forlornly kept dropping nickles into the juke box.

Rick had a ham sandwich and beer and learned nothing from the weary waitress. She had been brought down from Jax to take May Carter's job a week ago. No, she had never known May Carter.

The proprietor, sitting behind the cash window and listening without apparent interest to a news broadcast, liked to talk. Sheriff Holt and a crummy little guy had been around an hour ago asking him questions, like he knew why May had been killed. Sure he'd known May for years and years, even before her old man died. He'd

taken pity on her and given her a job here, though she was just a kid. Then last week she left without warning. One day she said she wouldn't be in tomorrow, and next morning he was stuck without help. That was gratitude for you. He was sorry she'd been killed. A hard worker, though not much for looks.

"Was she a friend of Sabina Felice?"

"That's what Holt asked too. Sure Miss Felice used to come in here. She was a gay one all right. But she and May friends—how should I know?" He eyed Rick suspiciously. "You ain't a New York cop, Mister?"

"No."

"Funny how you all ask the same questions. That girl too, who was in here no more'n twenty minutes ago. Boy, she was a knock-out."

"Dark eyes and curls?" Rick asked.

"That's her."

Rick went into the sun and walked north up the frying cracked stretch of sidewalk. He turned into a stucco two-story building across the street from the railroad station. It seemed incredible that Palm City was the county seat and this the county building.

In the single room that was the sheriff's office, Don Holt had his gun-belt hung over the chair on which he slouched on his spine. Sergeant Midge looked angry in his heavy tweeds.

"Hi, Rick." The sheriff waved an immense paw. "I was telling Midge how you scored a 199x200 in the Timed-fire event. That was in Coral Gables, wasn't it? Rick took seven firsts and two seconds in those matches."

"Second to you," Rick said. "You won the .22 and .45 individuals, didn't you?"

HOLT slapped his thigh resoundingly. "Rick let me have two events. Wasn't that white of him, Midge? I was lucky, though. There's no beating Rick when he's hot."

"You're both marvels," Midge said dryly, pulling his heavy suit away from his body. "What I'm looking for is somebody who has been making targets out of human beings."

Rick said: "Did it occur to you that somebody on our train might have been disguised?"

"Everything occurs to me except to bring summer clothes down to this hell-hole. So you changed your mind about Nelda Ware's wound being self-inflicted?"

"I'm trying to think of all the angles."

"Well, look at that angle this way," Midge said. "If the wound is self-inflicted, Nelda Ware did it because she's the killer and wants to show that she's one of the prospective victims too. That means she isn't the daughter, and I still think she is. And it means she's trying to defraud the estate with Joe Barr, so it would be Barr who'd advise her to pull that stunt. And Barr wouldn't. He's too smart a shamus for that. He knows a corny trick like that would arouse suspicion instead of diverting it."

"Uh-huh," Rick agreed. "That's why I got the idea that the killer was disguised on the train."

Midge sighed. "You mean Sabina Felice or Camilla Rogers?"

"I mean somebody who would lay low during the trip, disguised enough not to be easily recognizable, then at night slip over to Nelda Ware's berth."

Sheriff Holt roared with laughter. "That's a hot one, Rick. You've been reading comic books."

"One of the many things wrong with that," Midge said, "is that those two women arrived in Palm City an hour ago on a train from New York. Eddie

Mix was with Camilla Rogers and Reuben Jones was on the train too. That just about completes it."

"All roads leads to Palm City," Rick muttered.

Midge shrugged. "I sort of thought that would happen. "That's why I was down at the station to meet the train. They read in the paper about May Carter and rushed down, the way you and Deborah File and Barr and Nelda Ware did."

"A couple of million dollars is a lot of money to want to protect," Holt said.

Midge nodded. "They know there's something down here. Sabina Felice, of course. She started out from here and received Anselm File's letters here. Eddie Mix likes to be at the trouble center so that nothing can be put over on him. But I can't figure where Reuben Jones comes in, unless he's watching out for Deborah File."

"He's an old friend of the family," Rick said.

"I know that." Midge loosened his necktie to let air reach his body. "I heard of your run-in with Eddie Mix in headquarters. He's bad medicine, Rick."

Sheriff Holt's eyes gleamed. "Like I said before, I'll run that tin-horn gangster in. I don't care at all for these Northern tough boys coming into my county."

"It might be better to let them all loose and see what they're after," Midge suggested. "You have a man shadowing Eddie Mix."

Rick said: "Where are Joe Barr and Nelda Ware staying?"

"At a tourist house. They're being watched too."

"Mrs. Reeves' house?" Rick asked.

Midge looked at Holt.

"It was Mrs. Reeves' house," Holt said. "But she died a couple of months ago. Only rented it anyway. It's run by Amy Kaler now—a local woman."

"I see you haven't been wasting your time, Rick," Midge observed.

"I haven't much time," Rick said. "I have to start back tomorrow morning. So you don't think there's anything in the disguise idea?"

"I told you they came on a later train."

Rick sucked his pipe. "She could have been on our train and got off at South Carolina and switched to a later train. Did you study the timetables?"

Midge waved a hand toward the railroad station on the other side of the road. "They've got all the timetables you want if you want to waste your time. And Rick, don't only watch Eddie Mix. Be careful generally."

"You told me that before.

"Several times. You won't be lucky all the time."

"Huh!" Sheriff Holt snorted. "If it comes to shooting, I'll stake Rick against any gangster you can find."

"Not when it's shooting in the back," Midge drawled. "And not necessarily a gangster."

Rick laughed, but he was surprised to find how strained his laughter was. He said so long to the two men and went across to the station. The ticket agent was glad to have somebody to talk to.

CHAPTER XVI

Eddie Mix

MRS. YARD bustled across the court, her arms filled with towels and her face sweating joyously. As Rick plodded up from the road, she beamed at him, happy in the illusion that the day's prosperity was a harbinger of the coming winter season.

She entered the cabin next to the one occupied by the three men who wore guns. Through the opening and

closing door Rick caught a flash of a girl in the dim interior. He did not see her face.

Rick cut between the cocoanut palms and passed his own cabin. On the tiny porch of her cabin Deborah rocked gently on a creaking rocker. The white of her slacks and thin shirt heightened the tan of her face and throat. Looking at her, Rick felt his heart turn over.

Reuben Jones sat on the single step at Deborah's feet. From a distance the blazing slack suit that covered his slight form made him look like a boy in the first flush of growing up. Closer, his wrinkled face and gnarled bare arms made his clothes simply ridiculous.

"Hot, ain't it?" Jones said affably. "I came down to look after Debby. I guess now she's got nobody but me."

Rick wiped dust and sweat from his brow. "How did you know she was here?"

"I read in the paper about May Carter comin' from this here place and I tried to get in touch with Debby and couldn't, so I put two and two together."

Deborah stopped rocking and glanced sharply down at Jones' head. Then the rocker resumed its rhythmic creaking.

"There's nothing like higher mathematics to give the right answers," Rick observed dryly.

Jones ignored the irony. "Guess who was on the train with me?"

"Sabina Felice and Eddie Mix and Camilla Rogers."

"So you know? I guess you heard from that New York cop—what's his name? Some kind of bug, or somethin'."

"Midge."

"Yes—Midge," Jones said. "He was at the station when the train pulled in. He told me where you and Debby was stayin'."

"There must have been fun with Camilla and Sabina on the same train."

Reuben Jones chuckled. "That was some scrap they had in the police station. But they didn't go near each other on the train. That Sabina, she's some woman. You wouldn't believe it, but she tried to make me. First time that happened to me in thirty years. She stuck to me like a leech. Still, I'm not kiddin' myself. What she wanted was to find out if I knew anything. But she'd have to get up pretty early in the mornin' to——"

He broke off and stared past Rick. Deborah's rocker was suddenly silent.

RICK twisted his head into the fiery dying sun and saw Eddie Mix come out of the double cabin across the court. "Okay, George," Mix called out. He moved on as far as the car parked in front of the next cabin and then turned and looked across the court at Rick.

The three men came out of the cabin. Two got into the front seat of the car and one into the back seat, but Mix stayed where he was, very still, not taking his eyes from Rick.

Rick took a few steps to his left, in front of the hibiscus, so that Deborah and Reuben Jones would be out of any possible line of fire. He watched Mix's face, swarthy and impassive under the snap brim of his hat, and he watched Mix's right hand hanging loosely at his side.

"Come on, Eddie," the man behind the wheel said.

Eddie Mix got into the back seat of the sedan and the car drove off. The door of Mix's cabin was open, and Camilla Rogers, in brief shorts and briefer halter, was framed there. Then the door closed.

One of the other single cabins had also been taken during Rick's absence. A gaunt man, wearing an open vest over a blue shirt, came out of it and walked

to a battered coupe parked near the road. He seemed to be in a hurry.

"So Mix has pals here?" Jones muttered. "Those guys was here when we came. I guess he got in touch with them to meet him."

"Yes," Rick said, thinking that there were four gunmen now to cope with. And a woman, in addition, who wanted to kill him. He returned to the foot of the porch and again used the handkerchief on his face.

"How do you like detecting, Debby?" he asked.

Deborah stood up. "I'm afraid I'm not very good at it. Another shower would feel good before dinner." She entered her cabin.

"Debby's got a fine idea," Jones said. "I mean about a shower. Is that your cabin? Mine's next to it."

He walked to Rick's cabin with him.

"Don't tell me Sabina Felice is staying here too?" Rick said.

"She disappeared right after we got off the train." Jones showed his teeth. "Some woman! I was wishing I was thirty years younger. Even twenty." He dropped his voice. "They searched Eddie Mix when he got off the train, but he didn't have a gun on him. Too smart. But he could get another from them pals of his. See what I mean?"

"Thanks," Rick said.

He started to shed his clothes as soon as he closed the door. He was down to his slacks by the time he reached the bathroom. He folded them neatly on the seat and stepped into the stall shower. The water was tepid and hard and clammy. He stayed under it a long time in the hope that enough of it would invigorate him.

WHEN he at last turned the shower off, he heard movements in the cabin. Now, suddenly, he was cold, standing naked in the stall and straining to hear. There was no mistaking the sound of feet in the other room. And his gun in its holster was out there on the dresser.

Rick leaned out of the stall. The door was open an inch or two, but only his bed was in his line of vision. Leaving the water running, he stepped out from under the shower and put his pants on over his wet body. He went to the door and listened at the crack. The running water made too much noise.

Slowly he pushed the door open. More and more of the small room appeared, and still he could not see who was in there. The dresser was in the corner that was out of sight, and his gun was on the dresser. He sidled through the door opening.

Camilla Rogers stood in front of the dresser, her hand stretched out toward his revolver.

She heard the hurried pad of Rick's bare feet and withdrew her hand. She was not startled.

"I heard your shower running," she said. "I was waiting for you to come out."

Rick opened a dresser drawer and brushed the revolver and holster into it. When he turned to Camilla, there was only inches between them. Her face was turned up to his. Her closeness made Rick uneasy. In a way she was wearing less than he, her skimpy shorts and halter not covering much of her burnished olive skin.

"Why did Eddie send you?" he asked.

"He didn't send me. He'd kill me if he knew I came here." She swayed an inch closer to him, cutting the space between them in half. "I have a proposition."

Warily, Rick stepped back. "I doubt if it's my sex appeal."

"I'm not a cheap tramp like that fat redhead. This is strictly dough and

nothing else. When I get my old man's money, there'll be a big slice waiting for you."

"What makes you think I can help you?"

"Listen," she said tensely. "You got an inside track. If you figure Deborah File will get the dough and then you'll marry her, you're backing the wrong horse. I'm the heiress."

"Then why do you need me?"

"I got to know where I stand and what's going on."

There were three windows on three sides of the cabin. Rick wondered if anybody could see them from outside.

"For instance," Camilla went on, "where did Mrs. Reeves fit in? Who was she?"

"So she fits in?" Rick said. "You see, I didn't even know that."

"Don't be a wise guy," she said impatiently. "I'm willing to pay for what you give me. Eddie isn't getting anywhere. I told him it was screwy coming down here, but he knew you took the train and——"

"How did he know?"

Her teeth gleamed. "Eddie's smart. He had some of his boys tail you. You made a mistake starting up with him. But in some way's he's not as smart as you."

The door opened.

"I'm smart enough," Eddie Mix said.

AS RICK turned to the door, he thought of his revolver in the drawer behind him. Eddie Mix was standing in the doorway with the court at his back, his arms loose, his face dark as a thundercloud.

"Eddie!" Camilla said tightly. "I tried to pump this guy. Eddie, listen to me!"

Mix right arm started to move up to his necktie. And Rick knew that he couldn't get his revolver out of his drawer in time or cover the ten feet between himself and the man who wanted to kill him.

Camilla threw herself forward. "Eddie, not here! The cops——"

Mix tried to sweep her away with his left hand. Rick came in behind her, and he was there when Mix brushed Camilla out of the way, and his fist was already lashing out. It caught the gangster flush on the mouth. Mix rocked on his heels, with his right hand already under his shoulder.

Rick crossed with a left to the midriff and followed with another right to the jaw, hurrying his punches. Mix was like a punching bag, not making any defense because he was concentrating on getting his gun out. He spun and his right shoulder hit the doorjamb.

Reuben Jones was suddenly on the porch, poking his ancient .44 Colt into Mix's side.

"Take it easy," Jones said. "Just keep your hands in sight."

Groggily Eddie Mix looked over his shoulder. His right hand reappeared, empty. He used the back of it to wipe flecks of blood from his swollen lips.

Camilla stirred on the floor where she crouched beside the bed. She hadn't uttered a sound.

"This is getting monotonous," Rick said, trying to sound flippant, but not feeling that way at all. "My knuckles never get a chance to heal."

Eddie Mix said nothing. He leaned against the doorjamb, panting like a racehorse, keeping his eyes flat and smoldering on Rick's face. Even when Rick's hands were on his clothes, Mix did not move. Rick lifted a snub-nosed .32 out of the shoulder clip.

"I better keep this," Rick said. "Now beat it."

EDDIE MIX went without a word or without a backward glance. He

walked across the court and into the cabin. The sedan was parked near the road where Mix had left it when he had returned. Mix's three pals apparently hadn't come back with him.

Camilla brushed past Rick. He caught her arm on the porch.

"You don't have to go back to him if you're afraid."

"Damn you!" she said. "I hope to God he kills you!"

She ran across the court. The door of her cabin slammed behind her.

"Charming girl," Rick said, sucking his cracked knuckles.

"Like her mother." Reuben Jones caressed the barrel of his revolver. "So he got himself a gun, like I said he would. I seen him go into your cabin and figured I'd better be ready for trouble. But you was handlin' him all right."

"Thanks just the same," Rick said. "And you needn't keep up the pose with me. If Camilla's like her mother, you wouldn't know."

"So you caught on?" Reuben Jones rubbed his cheek with the flat of his hand. "What a mess I made of it! How the hell could I guess who Eddie Mix was? I didn't even know he was in the picture till later."

"Did they do the killing?"

"That's what's worryin' me most," the old man said slowly. "They wouldn't tell me if they did, would they? Well, I ain't taken the shower yet."

Rick let him go. He closed the door and locked it and went into the bathroom to turn off the shower. Then he unloaded Mix's pistol and stuck it between the spring and mattress of his bed.

It was getting dark, but Rick didn't put on a light as he dressed. He kept looking out of the window. The other three hadn't come back. Midge had pointed out that there was little protection against a bullet in the back. There was a lot less against four bullets from four guns.

When he was in the court, he was surrounded by lighted windows. Deborah's cabin was lit and Mix's and Jones' and and the one occupied by the gaunt man in the unbuttoned vest. He was the only one visible, seated on the step of his porch, his long jaw indolently working on chewing tobacco. He looked casually across at Rick.

JOE BARR'S well-knit body lounged comfortably in the sheriff's chair. A deputy was seated on the desk.

"I guess you're right," the deputy was saying. "The big dough is in private law." He turned as Rick entered.

"Ah, Rick," Barr said. "I was telling Williams here about the Coxson case. I think that's the first time we met, when you interviewed me."

"He says he killed a guy named Coxson and his bodyguard while they both had rifles and he only had a .32," the deputy said.

"Did a nice job of it too," Rick said. "Coxson was an extortionist and mixed murder with it. Joe tracked him down after the police couldn't get to first base. Coxson and his gunsel were waiting for Joe with rifles, but he was too good for them."

Barr grinned. "Got a ten grand fee from the dame Coxson had been taking to the cleaners. . . . Getting closer to home, Ricky, did you dig up anything?"

"Did you?" Rick said. Barr only laughed and Rick turned to the deputy. "Where's Holt?"

"He took a New York dick home to supper. You Rick Train? I heard them say they was going around to see you."

Rick picked up the phone on the desk and called Holt's house. Her husband, Mrs. Holt said, had just left. No, he

hadn't brought a man named Midge home to supper, though he'd said he would. She hadn't any idea where he had gone.

"Want to leave a message?" the deputy asked when Rick hung up.

"Never mind." Rick nodded to Barr and went out.

Now in the evening, the Orange Grove was looking up. A lot of kids in their teens were dancing to the juke box and the counter was lined. Rick had a couple more sandwiches and three beers. He couldn't find out much about Mrs. Reeves, though most of the people there seemed to have known her. She had been a quiet woman of thirty, living alone in her rented boarding house since her husband died, until she herself died.

Rick got a lift from a trailer truck. From the road he saw that every light in Mrs. Yard's Cabin Court was out. If Midge and Holt had come here to visit him, they evidently hadn't waited.

Rick walked in the shadows of the cabins, his jacket open and his right hand high, near his gun. In his cabin he found no note for him. He wondered what Midge or Holt had wanted.

He stood on the porch, listening to the night. Where had Deborah gone to do her detecting tonight? And what would the others be doing?

A car swung in from the road and came to a jerking stop between the palms. Rick's hand closed over his gun as he recognized the sleek sedan. Camilla Rogers hurried out. Nobody was with her.

She saw him on his porch and turned toward him. She was still in her shorts and halter, and the swath of moonlight that lay across the court glistened on her smooth flesh.

"He took her!" Camilla cried when she was still ten feet away. "Damn him, he took her!"

Rick leaped off the porch. His fingers were savage on her bare arm.

"Do you mean Deborah?"

Her voice and face and hair were wild. "Eddie snatched her!" she spat out.

CHAPTER XVII

Reuben Jones

REUBEN JONES stepped around the corner of the cabin. He had changed his garden suit for an immaculate Palm Beach suit and a rakish Panama hat. Rick glanced bleakly at him and then turned back to Camilla Rogers.

"You're hurting me," she whimpered, trying to squirm out of his grip.

Fiercely Rick pulled her against him. "You'll be hurt a lot worse unless you talk."

"That's why I came back—to tell you. Eddie went into her cabin and put a gun on her and made her go into the car."

"Why?" Rick demanded.

"He said to make her talk so we'll know how to play our hand. But that's not it. He knows you're nuts about her, and he hates your guts. He's going to get even on you through her. He—— Ooh, you're hurting my arm!"

Rick's fingers had contracted involuntarily. He loosened his grip, but he did not release her.

"Where did he take her?"

"I'll tell you." Camilla's face was vicious with hate. "I know what Eddie's like when he gets a pretty girl where he can do what he wants with her."

"Four of them," Reuben Jones muttered. His voice was infinitely weary.

Rick swung toward him. "Where were you when it happened?"

"I was goin' to take Debby to din-

ner and I went into my cabin to change my clothes. I heard that car pull out, but I didn't think nothin' of it. Then I called for Debby, and she wasn't in her cabin or anywhere." His voice turned shrill as a woman's. "What are we waitin' for?"

Camilla said urgently: "I said I'd take you there. That's why I came with the car."

Rick threw her arm away from him. "Reuben, you go for the police."

"There's not time," Camilla protested. "All I want is that Eddie doesn't touch her. I don't give a hang about her, but he's got no right to mess with another woman. Both of you better come."

"All right," Rick said.

Camilla went ahead to the car and slid in behind the wheel. Jones held Rick back.

"It's a trap," Jones whispered.

Rick nodded dully. "Of course. But he might have Debby, so I'll have to risk it."

"He's got her all right. Why wasn't she waiting for me?"

"That's your story," Rick said.

"Hurry!" Camilla called. Her fingers tapped the wheel impatiently.

"So you don't trust me?" Jones whispered.

"No, but I've got to take you along. If you're not in with them, Camilla wouldn't dare lead me into the trap with you. You heard too much."

Jones said tightly: "Listen! I done a lot of foolish things, but there wasn't nothin' like this. It's Debby they got. And it's my fault she's in this mess." He was pleading. "Just give me a chance at Eddie Mix. That's all I ask."

"After me," Rick said.

HE MADE Jones get in front, where he could watch him and Camilla both from the back seat. Camilla drove several miles up the road, away from Palm City, then turned right onto a rutted narrow dirt road that was hardly more than a cow track. There were no trees here or even tall bushes. On either side of the road lay swampy stretches covered by scraggly waist-high brush.

Rick heard another car behind. He looked through the rear window and in the tricky moonlight saw the dark outline of a car rolling slowly five hundred feet behind. They might have got hold of another car to close the trap on both sides, or it might be anybody at all. After all, this was a public road, though evidently not much used and apparently leading to nowhere.

Camilla stopped the car. "There it is."

Peering, Rick could distinguish a small low structure some distance ahead and considerably off the road.

"Why aren't there any lights in the place?" Rick said.

"Search me. Maybe they're gone. But that's where they took her. Up ahead there's a path. They'd think it funny if I parked right in front of the path.

She was clever, or trying to be. Rick said: "I've got to trust you now, Reuben. You keep Camilla in the car."

She looked around swiftly at Rick, and terror leaped across her face. She twisted around to the door at her left and tried to get it open. Reuben took his .44 out of his pocket.

"Rest easy, Camilla," he told her. "I didn't bargain for this. I think it's my fault and maybe I'd like to make up for it."

Camilla subsided behind the wheel. Her bare shoulders were hunched together, shivering. Rick got out of the car.

"I can tie her up and go along," Jones suggested.

R. Fuqua

My bullet hit him dead center and he fell in his tracks

"If you find rope and want to take the trouble," Rick said. "But I'm not waiting. They might see the car and recognize it and spring the trap even though she can't give the signal."

Rick walked up the road. "Good hunting, son," the old man called after him.

Rick reached the path and went past it. Once he looked back. The car sat dark and silent on the road. He could not hear the car that had been behind them a few minutes before.

Suddenly Rick ducked low and stepped into the underbrush. His aim was to work across the swamp and come up behind the house. His feet sank ankle-deep in muck; thorns and burrs raked his clothes and hands and face. He moved doubled over, pushing the brush aside with his gun.

After a while he straightened up. He could still see the car. Probably it was seen from the house too. Were they expecting him to be so stupid as to come up the path? He wished desperately that the swamp growth were higher.

THE ground became soggier, sucking his legs into the calves. It was like walking through a nightmare, where each foot can be lifted only through the utmost concentration of effort. And the

mud as he pulled his foot out made a sucking sound that, he felt, could be heard for a mile, and the brush snapped and crackled as he ploughed through it. The knot into which his insides were tied made breathing difficult.

Now he could see that the building was no more than a clapboard shack. It was silent and looked dead. A frog croaked very close, louder than the thumping of his heart. He felt sweat run down his armpits and the knot in his stomach fell apart and jumped sickeningly. He was going to his death, for there were four of them, lying unseen in the brush, ready to pick him off at close range. This was madness. He had known that Camilla was tricking him, and he had been too smart. A trap was a trap, whether he walked into it knowingly or not, and the effect would be the same.

The ground hardened under his feet. The shack was in a clearing, on an island of firm ground in the swamp, but the clearing was only three sides of it. Brush grew practically to the back wall of the shack, and that was where he approached it.

He rose at the single window in the back wall. There was no glass in it. He peered through and distinguished a patch of white on the floor and an upright shadow near the door. He raised his gun, feeling a fury he could not control.

His brain cleared and he lowered his gun. The door of the shack faced the path. If one was watching the path from the shack, it meant that they expected him to come that way. Shooting one of them now would give him away and still leave three.

Keeping his shoulder against the wall, Rick moved around one corner of the shack and down the side. At the front corner he paused to draw breath into his constricted lungs and poked his face around the corner. Then he spun in a half-turn—and faced Eddie Mix.

Rick had seen him first by a split-second. But not being experienced in killing, he had let that precious moment go by, watching the gun hanging along Mix's side. They stood thirty feet apart, and Eddie Mix was enormously wide in the moonliht.

"This is the way I wanted it," Eddie Mix said in a flat expressionless voice. "You and me, with guns in our hands."

IT FLASHED across Rick's mind that the gangster was probably telling the truth. Mix would have shot him in the back if he had had the chance where there were no witnesses, for his own men and a body could be disposed of; but Rick knew that Eddie Mix preferred it this way for his professional killer's pride, to meet on even terms the cocky amateur who had on three occasians shamed him with his fists. Because Eddie Mix had to show that he was a better man with the weapon he lived by or would never be able to face himself or, what was worse, his fellow rats. And for that one instant Rick admired Eddie Mix a little, but only a little.

They watched each other for a taut, tiny space of time that seemed to have no end. Then Eddie Mix brought up his arm with blinding speed.

Rick merely twisted his wrist, shooting from his hip the way he had so often practiced with more difficult targets. There was the thunder of Rick's revolver and the rolling echo of it across the swamp—and then overlapping thunder from other guns.

Not Eddie Mix's gun. He was a dark splotch sprawled face down on the ground with a .38 slug between his eyes.

Beyond the clearing, where the path cut through the brush, a tiny glow came and went with the slamming of one of

the guns. There were two guns out there, though, and both gunmen kept very low in the brush, taking no chances. Rick dropped to the ground and placed two bullets carefully where he had glimpsed that first flash. He didn't think he had hit anything, and stretched on the ground he waited for a target, strangely without fear or any emotion now that he was in it. He was in the open; yet experience made him confident that even a professional gunman would be wild with a pistol or revolver at fifty or a hundred feet in tricky moonlight.

And then he knew why those two out there were waiting. He twisted his head. The door of the shack flew open. A man stepped into view, looking for him. Rick tilted his gun muzzle upward at a target he could not miss blindfolded. The man never saw him before he died.

Another fusillade spattered over Rick's head. They were shooting high because they did not dare rise from their cover and angle their shots down. Rick threw one bullet to encourage them to keep down—and then his gun was empty. He had used up the five cartridges with which he had loaded his revolver, and additional ammunition was in his bag in the cabin.

But even as he emptied his revolver he planned his next move. He crawled backward to the open shack door. His flesh squirmed as he touched the hand of the man he had killed and loosened the heavy automatic from the lax fingers. The dead man blocked the door. Rick had to rise, crouching, to hurdle him. The shooting started again. There was a tug at his leg, as if fingers tried to clutch him; then he was in the protective darkness of the cabin.

THE silence returned, and through it there rose a thin animal mewling at Rick's feet. The white splotch on the dirt floor took form. He dropped to his knees and felt soft flesh.

"Debby?" he whospered hoarsely.

The mewling was repeated. He struck a match and Deborah's face leaped into being. A dirty gag, through which she was trying to speak, was tied about her mouth, and her wrists and ankles were tied. Her immense eyes held all the terror in the world.

A bullet angled through the open door and ploughed through the wall overhead. Flicking out the match, Rick moved away from her.

"You'll have to stay tied up for a minute or two more," he said.

She was quiet now, and out there they were quiet too. It seemed incredible that considerably less than a minute had passed since he had come face to face with Eddie Mix.

"I got two of them," he said, trying to make his voice light. "I've got only two to go. At last all my shooting at targets means something."

He had time to think now and to be afraid, and the knot tightened again in the pit of his stomach. For their plan was obvious. There was only one window in the shack, at the back wall; the two sides were solid, blind. One of them would sneak up to one of the blind sides and slip around toward the door, while the other, covered by the brush that grew up to the back wall, would rise at the window. He would be caught between two fires, and one of them would be able to pick him off. It was a good plan.

He breathed heavily, trying to think while he checked the automatic. It was a heavy Army .45 with the magazine fully loaded with seven cartridges. He hefted it to get the feel.

Behind him Deborah was mewling again through her gag. They'd have to kill her too, of course. If he dove

for the cover of the bush, they might get him before he reached it. They had had a chance to come in closer, probably to the edge of the clearing.

He stood just inside the door, peering out, trying to think of a fool-proof counter-attack. And then he saw Reuben Jones running along the path from the road, unmistakable in that Panama hat and white suit. He was very close, stumbling a little as he ran, and his ancient Colt waved in his hand.

"Get back!" Rick yelled. "They're in the brush! Duck!"

Jones came on. He was not looking at Rick, but at something in the brush in a line with the right corner of the shack. He reached the edge of the clearing and turned and lifted his gun. And Rick knew that Jones had seen the movement of a man crawling.

Reuben Jones shot three times, and in the brush somebody screamed.

RECKLESSLY Rick leaped over the dead man who blocked the doorway and ran across the front wall of the cabin. A gun spoke, but not Jones' gun or Rick's.

Reuben Jones did a queer dance. He dropped his gun and put both hands up to his chest and crumpled.

Then Rick was at the corner of the shack. He glimpsed a dark head dip below the brush to where the fourth gunman had crawled. With cold, savage deliberation, Rick poured shots in a pattern. Something crashed there. A head and a pair of shoulders rose, wobbling. Two hands that refused to be steady gripped a gun and tried to swing it toward Rick.

The heavy pistol jumped against Rick's palm for the last time. The head and shoulders vanished.

The silence was back, containing only the hollow thumping of Rick's heart. He leaned against the shack, momentarily too tired to move. Then he roused himself and walked over to where Reuben Jones lay. He found, to his surprise, that he was limping.

Reuben Jones' white suit was forever ruined by the blood that poured from his chest. His flesh was turning cold.

The beam of a flashlight moved up the path. Rick lifted his eyes and blinked into the glare. The gaunt man in the unbuttoned vest was behind the light. The muzzle of his rifle focused down at Rick.

"Drop that gun!" the man ordered.

Wearily Rick obeyed. "Are you one of Sheriff Holt's deputies?"

"Yeah. Is this guy dead? Did you kill him?"

"He's dead, but I didn't kill him."

"You're this Rick Train that Holt is always speaking about. He said you're all right." The deputy sprayed his light about the clearing. "My God!" he said. "And I was parked back on the road, watching that other car."

They heard a motor roar into life. The deputy bit his lip in indecision.

"That's Camilla Rogers," Rick told him. "She's not important."

"And I kept tagging after her on account of she had the car. I'll get hell for this. Playing tag with her and three dead men here."

"Five," Rick said tonelessly. "There are two more in the swamp."

"My God!" the deputy said. "Did you kill 'em all?"

"Only three." Rick rose to his feet. "There's a girl in the shack. She's tied and gagged."

"My God!" the deputy said.

CHAPTER XVIII

Anselm's Daughter

SHERIFF DON HOLT spread his bulk on the chair behind his desk

and rapturously lectured the two deputies in his office.

"Like I always told you, a pistol or revolver is the toughest weapon on earth to handle right. When it comes right down to it, what chance did those killers have against Rick? They were only professional gunmen, but Rick is an expert marksman. To him a gun ain't just something to kill somebody with. It's to hit what you shoot at. And there's the difference."

Rick said dryly: "I wish you'd told that to Eddie Mix and his gunsels."

He was sitting on one chair with his leg propped up on another. A doctor, clinging tenaciously to a slender cigar between his lips, was bandaging the wound in Rick's calf.

"A scratch." Holt dismissed the flesh wound with a wave of his brawny arm. "That proves my point. The guy who shot at you didn't want to scratch your leg. He wanted to put a slug where it counted, and he couldn't because he was more than ten feet from you. He was a killer, that's what was wrong with him. What's the easiest and simplest way to kill with a small gun? Walk up to a guy and poke the gun in his ribs and let him have it. Guys like that use a gun like a knife—a close-range weapon."

The gaunt deputy patted his rifle barrel. "That's why I like this baby. I can hit a nail at a hundred yards."

"Sure. A rifle. But try hiding that in your pants or snapping a quick shot. Remember Skeeter Morgan? He knew I was looking for him for that juke joint killing. He stepped around a house and emptied an automatic at my back. Missed me clean every shot, and he's the lad that swaggered around for years with a gun in his pocket. I can tell you a hundred stories like that. It's like frying eggs. It looks easy and everybody thinks they can do it, but not one in a million really knows how. A revolver is a fine, sensitive weapon, if you know how to use it, but even a gunman won't take the time or ain't got the talent to learn. So Rick mowed 'em down."

Rick shivered a little, remembering. Holt could enjoy it, but Rick knew that as for himself there would always be a spot of horror inside of him.

"That'll hold you," the doctor said, rising. "Maybe your leg will be a little stiff, but you'll be able to walk on it."

"Thanks," Rick said. He limped a few feet across the office, and now he was aware for the first time in two days of the bruise on his other thigh where the coupe had clipped him.

Holt beamed proudly at him, then turned back to his deputies. "From now on you're practicing on my pistol range twice a week, and I mean it. I don't expect you to ever shoot like me or Rick; but I want you to be one of the few men who can hit the side of a barn with a pistol."

"There's a woman who can," Rick observed.

Holt's face went solemn. "Yeah—her. I wonder where Midge went to. We mustn't forget about her."

RICK hadn't forgotten. He was thinking that all of this tonight had been unnecessary; the deaths of four gangsters and Reuben Jones had not in any way served the essential purpose of finding the murderer of May Carter and Miss Brenda File. Knowing who it was was not enough. Proof was needed. And five and a half days of his seven were gone, and it would require another day to return to New York.

Joe Barr burst into the office. He was breathing hard, as if he had raced up the stairs.

"How's Debby?"

"Badly shaken, but she's all right,"

Rick told him. "She's at the sheriff's house, where his wife is taking care of her. How did you hear?"

"I was in that juke joint—the Orange Grove. The gun-fight is all they're talking about. Did Camilla Rogers get away?"

"She won't get far," Holt asserted. "We got a state alarm out for her and the car."

Gently the door swung open and Sergeant Midge stood in the office. He looked wilted in his tweeds, but his pale-blue eyes were unusually lustrous.

"Where you been, Midge?" Holt boomed. "While you've been gone, Rick's been cleaning out a nest of rats."

"Yes?" Midge didn't sound greatly interested.

Wearily Rick repeated the story. Once Midge nodded, muttering, "Good riddance," but he had no other comment until Rick finished. Then he said: "So that's how Reuben Jones fitted in! How long have you known?"

Rick shrugged. "Almost from the first. Camilla was too anxious to split the inheritance with Brenda File, and Reuben was too anxious for Miss File to accept. He must have insisted on that with Camilla, because he was very fond of Miss File and Debby and didn't want to leave them out wholly in the cold. It seemed like a good plan. His evidence that Camilla was the daughter would count for a lot. And he, the only one who visited Anselm's house, had a good chance to steal the documents which he later gave Camilla. And he told her the background. The hoax might have worked if a couple of more claimants hadn't come on the scene."

"Why didn't he choose a tamer accomplice?" Midge said.

"He admitted he fumbled it. I imagine he looked for somebody with the legitimate name of Camilla and whose background couldn't be traced to childhood. Camilla Rogers fitted in nicely, coming as she did from Texas and being an orphan who was brought up by a woman who is now dead. Reuben said he didn't know about Eddie Mix. When he did find out that Camilla was a gangster's girl friend, he was already in too deep. But in the end he did what he had to do. He gave his life to save Debby and me."

There was a short silence in that room full of men.

"Anyway, you got your case, Midge," Sheriff Holt boomed. "That Camilla girl will be picked up before morning. A gangster's gunmoll! It's plain she did the shooting in New York."

"I've got my case," Midge said mildly, "but not the way you think. Thanks for lending me your car. How about all of us taking a ride in it?"

The room was instantly alert. Rick noticed the lines of Joe Barr's handsome face suddenly tense.

"Any fireworks?" Holt asked eagerly.

"Probably not," Midge said. "That depends."

HOLT got behind the wheel with Midge beside him, while Rick and the gaunt deputy sat in the back seat. Barr was following them in when Holt swung his head and thundered that he didn't care for a shamus in his hair.

"Let him come," Midge said placidly. "I'm sure he'll be interested."

It wasn't a long ride. Rick had no idea where they were going until they reached the cemetery. When the nose of the car swung into it, Rick noticed Barr smile the way a deathmask might smile.

The cemetery covered no more than five or six acres. It had no fence or gate around it; only a single dirt road cut through it. Holt was rolling the car up the road when Midge said tersely: "Stop!" The car jolted to a halt.

Somewhere from the field of tombstones a rhythmic tapping drifted toward them.

"Ghosts," Barr simpered. "Or a corpse trying to break out of his grave."

"Shut up!" Midge whispered. "This is a hell of a big break. I didn't think we'd have it as easy as this."

Abruptly the tapping ceased.

Holt said: "Our motor and headlights gave us away. We'll all get out. Brown, you take the car through the cemetery, like you was taking a short cut, and then come back around this side and park."

They slipped out of the car and crouched behind tombstones. The gaunt deputy drove the car through the cemetery. They watched the headlights crawl between the dead and then turn away when the car emerged on the farther road. For a while the night maintained its silence. Then, suddenly and urgently, the tapping resumed.

"Let's go," Midge whispered. "And keep low."

THE rich Florida moon spread an eerie pallor over the white and gray tombstones. The tapping was like the beating of a giant heart here among the dead. Rick was conscious of his wound now as he followed the others from one grave to another. There was a coldness in his blood that was not fear. The three other men scurrying from tombstone to tombstone seemed as tenuous and unreal as the spirits of those who lay beneath the ground might be.

His ears told Rick that they were almost there. Midge rose. As if that were a signal, the others straightened up too, and Rick saw the figure. It crouched with its back to them at a small tombstone in a newer part of the cemetery where the graves were sparser. The right arm swung a hammer, or mallet.

Midge moved swiftly forward. The figure leaped up, glanced around, and broke into a frantic run.

"Stop!" Holt roared, reaching for his holster. His revolver leaped into his hand.

Rick hit the sheriff with his shoulder. "Don't shoot! It's a woman."

"A woman?" Holt's jaw hung loosely. "How the hell do you tell when they all wear pants these days?"

THEN he was running also, behind Midge who was sprinting with his head down. Rick tried to follow; his wounded leg stiffened under him and he gave up. Joe Barr was at his side, strolling casually as if he were completely out of it.

Together Rick and Barr walked to the tombstone. The hammer and chisel lay on the ground where the woman had dropped them. Barr played a fountain pen flashlight on the tombstone. The inscription read:

CAMILLA REEVES
Nee FILE
BORN: February 24, 1913
DIED: August 14, 1942
R. I. P.

The four letters of "File" were chipped. Evidently she must have just started to obliterate them.

Barr grinned sickly. "So there goes my share of the swag," he said lightly. "You can't blame a guy for trying."

A woman cried out in the night. Midge had caught her and Holt was coming up fast to join them.

Silently Rick and Barr watched the woman return between the two men. Her broken sobbing was the only sound in the night. Moonbeams glinted on her loose red hair.

THE deputy named Williams had a notebook open on the sheriff's desk,

but there wasn't much of Sabina Felice's statement to write down. She kept sobbing: "You're wrong! I didn't! I didn't!"

Sheriff Dan Holt, standing over her chair, roared down into her face. Sergeant Midge had found a comfortable wall against which to rest his shoulders. Rick slouched in a chair, his wounded leg stiff out in front of him, and moodily sucked his pipe.

"You killed them!" Holt thundered. "You followed May Carter to New York and then you——"

"No! No! I didn't even know May Carter was in New York. I didn't even know she was the one killed till I read it in the paper yesterday."

Midge moved reluctantly from the wall. "Mind if I try, Sheriff?"

Holt wiped his brow. "Go ahead."

"Let's start from the beginning," Midge said gently. "Mrs. Reeves was Camilla File, old Anselm's daughter. After she left the home of her foster mother, Mrs. Matha Ware, in Dig Center, Texas, she married Pat Reeves and came here to Palm City with him and settled down. Nobody knew that her maiden name was File. Two years ago her husband died and she had to take in boarders."

"What's that got to do with me?" Sabina protested.

"I'm coming to that. Somehow she got in touch with her father recently or her father got in touch with her. You were boarding at her house this summer. That was when she was receiving the letters from her father, and she showed them to you, telling you who he was. Shortly after that, Camilla Reeves died of cancer. And a few weeks after she was buried you read in the paper how Anselm File had also died and left his fortune to a mysterious daughter. You got hold of the letters. Probably they were among her personal belongings. Isn't that right so far?"

Her head dropped, the red hair dangling across her harried face. "But I didn't kill anybody."

"May Carter found out your scheme. I don't know how——" Midge's eyebrows arched. "Wait a minute. I've been asking around. Camilla Reeves and May Carter were close friends. May Carter took over her personal belongings."

"Sure," Holt said. "I could've told you that. May had the letters too, and this woman stole them from her."

"I didn't steal them! I gave May seven hundred good dollars for them. Everybody thought May was a quiet, meek girl, but she was a bloodsucker. She made me pay every cent I could lay my hands on."

Midge nodded. "But she wasn't satisfied with seven hundred dollars. She figured that if you'd paid that much for the letters, somebody at the other end would pay a lot more to learn the truth about them. So she went to New York and phoned old lady File. You found out about it and——"

"No! I didn't kill May. I never even knew she was in New York."

"I had you tabbed as the murderer as soon as I found Mrs. Reeves' tombstone," Midge told her. "I'd already connected you up with her and May Carter. Then you helped out my case against you by being in the cemetery trying to destroy the inscription."

"I was after the money, that's all. I wanted to make sure nobody found out Mrs. Reeves' maiden name was File. Maybe that's a crime, but it's not murder."

"Did you really believe you could get the money with only those letters to back you up?"

"Why not?"

Midge sighed. "Well, one lucky break for you is that you won't be tried

At sight of the sheriff's gun, her eyes widened and she began to tremble

for lack of intelligence. Even so, I think you realized you couldn't collect any more. The business got too big and too messy. Whether you committed the murders or not, weren't you afraid that if the truth about the letters got out you'd be accused of the murders? Isn't that why you came back to Palm City and waited until after midnight and then went to the cemetery to destroy the inscription?"

She looked down at her plump knees and said nothing.

JOE BARR and Nelda Ware came in. He held her by the wrist, as if he had dragged her here against her will. There was nothing babyish left in her features. Her frightened eyes fluttered from face to face and stopped longest on Sabina Felice.

"Nelda has something to tell you," Joe Barr said.

"I didn't commit a crime," she declared.

"Tell them," Barr snapped.

Nelda jutted her chin out defiantly. "What happened last night on the train —well, nobody tried to stab me."

"I didn't think so," Midge said. "Why did you pull the stunt?"

"I was scared. I thought if you found out I wasn't—well, who I said I was, Anselm File's daughter, I'd be the first one you'd suspect of those murders."

"And so she got the hairbrained idea of including herself in the list of victims or intended victims," Barr said. "When I told her that Sabina Felice was caught red-handed, she confessed her little gag to me. Ricky, do me a favor and tell Debbby I apologize for what I said about her on the train."

"She's the one!" Sabina's accusing shriek filled the office. She was on her feet, pointing a quivering finger at Nelda. "She killed May and Brenda File! She as good as confessed."

"That's a lie!" Nelda retorted. "They got the goods on you, so don't try to put it off on me."

"Quiet, both of you!" Holt boomed. He turned to Midge with his thumbs hooked in his gunbelt. "I'm no lawyer, but it seems to me that a smart D.A. can toss the shamus and the girl and Mrs. Ware into the jug. You want me to lock 'em up for extradition?"

Barr smiled. "What for?"

"Conspiracy, maybe."

Barr shook his head. "I'm afraid I know more law than you do, Sheriff. We laid no legal claim to the money."

"Because you had no chance to."

"That may be, but I know of no law that makes it a crime to tell an untruth to the newspapers so long as it doesn't contain libel. Isn't that right, Sarge?"

"Probably is," Midge conceded. "All this is small stuff. I'm interested in the murderer."

"She's the one!" Sabina Felice was off again. "She killed them. You got no more evidence against me than against her."

"Shut up!" Holt bellowed at her. "Accusing everybody in sight ain't going to help you. Who else knew May Carter and had reason to kill her?"

Rick took his pipe out of his mouth and spoke for the first time. "Nuts!" he said.

THE single word had the effect of a bombshell. They all turned to look at him. Even Sabina's sobs ceased.

"Huh?" Holt said.

"Nuts!" Rick repeated. He limped to the door and turned. "All along, the wrong side of the mirror was held up to us, and like damn fools we've been staring into it. The murderer meant us to look at the wrong side, and we very prettily obliged."

"You mean this girl ain't the murderer?" Holt said.

"I mean it's time we looked at the right side of the mirror."

"Come to the point," Midge said irritably.

"That's the point." Rick made them wait until he was satisfied with the draw of his pipe. "Turn the mirror around and you've got the picture. That's not enough, of course. You've got to prove it's the right picture. That shouldn't be so hard when I reach New York Thursday morning." He opened the door.

"Wait, Rick!" Holt said.

"Let him go," Midge told him wearily. "Rick insists on playing his little games."

Rick closed the door behind him and limped down the stairs.

CHAPTER XIX

Murder Wears a Skirt

NEXT morning, red tape enmeshed Rick and Deborah. They had intended to take the morning train back to New York, but Rick watched it pull into the station from a window of the county building. He saw Joe Barr and Nelda Ware get on it, and he turned wearily away with the sound of the departing train in his ears. A clerk handed him the statement Rick had spent all morning dictating. He read it and signed, while a state police captain stood nearby and groused to one of his men about Northerners who came to Florida to shoot up the place.

The fussy district attorney, sour at having had to curtail a fishing trip, was heckling Deborah now. Her face was drawn with shock that had not yet worn off. Her voice was listless, disinterested, which infuriated the D.A.

Then the newspapermen flocked down from Jacksonville and up from St. Petersburg and Tampa. They snapped scores of pictures of Deborah and made a hero of Rick, who was one of their own, and completely ignored the district attorney and police captain, to the vast displeasure of those gentlemen.

Sheriff Don Holt appeared for only a couple of minutes to bellow a lecture at the newspapermen concerning the now proven virtues of match shooting. Then he ducked downstairs again to the county jail where he and Sergeant Midge were working on Sabina Felice.

Word arrived that the sedan in which Camilla Rogers had fled had been found near the Titusville railroad station. There was a good chance that she had taken a train back north from there. So Rick had to tell about Camilla all over again.

At one-thirty Rick staged a revolution. He took Deborah's hand and said: "Our train leaves in twenty minutes and we're going to be on it. I have to appear at the induction camp tomorrow. Are you gentlemen trying to keep me out of the Army?"

That did it. Being on the public payroll, they couldn't afford to buck patriotism. With two minutes to spare, Rick and Deborah made the one-fifty train to New York.

Rick had been looking forward to the trip back with Deborah, but it wasn't any fun. She gazed out the window, with her face immobile and a film over her eyes, as if only part of her life had so far returned to her since her rescue last night from the shack. And Rick, sitting beside her, felt all twisted up inside. Fear was bad, but it could be overcome. There was no defense against the agony of waiting.

They retired early. That is, Deborah did. For the second night in a row Rick did not shut his eyes for a moment's sleep. He sat up all night in the washroom, keeping his gun loose in its

holster and his senses alert.

IN THE morning, after a good night's rest, Deborah was her sprightly self again. Her gay chattering during breakfast, and after, jarred him. He was very tired and a little sick. He fought his mounting jitters and wondered how big a fool he was.

"Didn't you sleep well last night?" she asked.

"Not very."

She looked curiously at him, and then they sat in silence, watching the New Jersey flatlands drift by. It was, he told himself bleakly, a hell of a way to be in the company of a girl he cared so much for on his last morning as a civilian. Or possibly his last morning as anything.

When the train left Newark, the passengers started to collect their belongings and put on their fall coats. Rick muttered an excuse to Deborah and limped into the washroom. His bag was under a chair where he had placed it an hour ago. He got into his topcoat and transferred his revolver from the holster to the right topcoat pocket. Then he slipped out of the washroom and moved through the train to the first car. At Pennsylvania Station he was the first one off.

He went as far as the ramp and put his back against a pillar. Three men, walking abreast and chatting together, came along. Rick stepped in front of them and went up the ramp with them as a shield behind him. Now and then he glanced back to make sure that nobody was hurrying up behind, but mostly his eyes searched the head of the ramp.

As he walked across the station to the Eighth Avenue subway, he kept one shoulder close to a wall. His bag swung easily in his left hand, but his right hand, closed over the gun in his pocket, was sweating. His fingers felt unnaturally stiff.

He put the bag down in order to insert the nickel in the turnstile with his left hand and then picked the bag up again. His eyes were never still. He limped toward the stairs leading to the uptown platform.

Then he saw the woman.

She was standing at the head of the stairs, leaning against the wall and reading a newspaper spread out in front of her face. Rick stopped. He could see both her hands holding the paper. The woman did not move; the paper did not dip. Rick looked at the light cloth coat flung carelessly over one arm. He looked down at her big flat-heeled shoes.

A group of people came along in a bunch. Rick stepped in among them and moved with them to the stairs, making sure to keep as far as possible from the woman when he passed her. Going down the stairs, he maneuvered it so that most of the group was behind him. Once he looked back, and the woman was starting down the stairs. She was still reading the newspaper as she descended so that it continued to block his view of her face.

RICK limped through the crowd on the platform and put his back against a newsstand. There was quite a mob on the platform. He looked back toward the woman, and he couldn't see her. She was behind a pillar or blocked out by people. His eyes roved the twenty feet or so between himself and the foot of the stairs. His trigger finger wouldn't loosen.

In a way, this was worse than last night when he had faced four armed men who were determined to kill him. Then, once he had been in it, there hadn't been time for thought. Now the suspense was gagging him.

Distantly a train rumbled. Sweat broke out on his forehead. This was it now, with the sound of a train drowning out a shot. But where was she?

The roar of the train grew louder. People moved from the benches and pillars toward the edge of the platform, and he had a clear view between himself and the stairs. She wasn't in sight.

Where had she gone to? Where in the name of heaven was she?

The wheels of the onrushing train made thunder in his ears. Panic seized him. She must be hidden behind one of the pillars, waiting until he turned his back to enter the train. She had to be. He took one step forward—and suddenly knew what had happened. He whirled.

She was there behind him, closing in after she had slipped around the newsstand. Her hand, hidden under the coat over her arm, was tight against her side. There was no paper to hide her face now, and for the smallest fraction of a second their eyes met.

Rick's sudden movement startled her. Her shoulders jerked, and that slight delay was fatal. Rick shot through his topcoat pocket.

She leaned against the newsstand as if life had abruptly become too heavy a burden to bear. Slowly she slid to the platform.

A strident scream rose above the rumble of the train. Somebody yelled: "He shot her! I seen it!" Another voice shouted hysterically: "Watch out, he's got a gun!"

Rick looked around. The first of the cars was pulling into the station. People cowered away from him in terror, while those behind pushed forward to see what the excitement was about. Only then did Rick realize that after the shot he had pulled his revolver out of his pocket and was holding it loosely in view.

A LITTLE man furiously battled his way through to the clear space that had spread around Rick and the dead body. Sergeant Midge had his gun out.

"Rick, you fool!" he said angrily. "You damn fool!"

Midge flashed his badge. "Police!" he snapped above the uproar. The train had stopped and was soundless. Subway guards appeared. Midge ordered them to keep the crowd back and dropped to his knees beside the body. He ripped the coat away that still covered the hand and arm. The dead fingers clutched a gun.

"A Belgian F.N.," Rick muttered. "Thirty-two caliber. The pattern of foreign guns was maintained to the end."

Nobody heard him. He stood alone in the din of voices, now hushed, and the swirl of curious, horrified faces. He was so tired that he did not know how he stayed on his feet.

A voice leaped above the others. "Rick! Please let me through! Rick!"

He turned his head. Deborah slipped past a guard who was trying to restrain her and raced toward Rick. For one moment she stopped at the sight of the motionless thing on the platform, then she was in his arms.

"Rick, what happened? Why did you disappear?"

It was infinitely good to hold her tight against his weary body.

"I had a job to do," he told her quietly. "I couldn't have you around while I did it."

She clung to him. "I was going through the turnstile when I heard somebody had been shot. I was afraid that you——" She glanced again at that motionless form. Midge had spread a handkerchief over the face. "Rick, who was she?"

"That was no lady," Rick said with

a crooked, mirthless grin. "That was Joe Barr."

CHAPTER XX

The Mirror Reversed

DISTRICT ATTORNEY ALVIN BANDERSON of Manhattan County propped an elbow on his massive desk and wiggled a finger at Rick. "You knew he'd be waiting somewhere around the subway entrance for you."

"I thought he might," Rick admitted.

Three chairs were arranged around the D.A.'s desk. Rick occupied the middle one. His top-coat was spread open around him and his eyes were half-closed with lack of sleep. On his right Sergeant Midge slouched with his hat on his knees. On his left Captain Connell puffed on a cigar in unaccustomed silence. An inconspicuous stenographer took notes.

"Precisely," the D. A. said. "You thought he might. And you knew he would have little chance against your superb marksmanship."

"Barr was no slouch with a gun," Midge drawled.

"I suppose not." The corners of the D.A.'s mouth lifted in a half-smile. "Barr had a gun in his hand and we know that he had made previous attempts to murder you. Legally you undoubtedly killed him in self-defense. My job is confined to the legal and not the moral aspects, I'm glad to say. When did you first suspect Joe Barr?"

"The same time Sergeant Midge did," Rick said.

Captain Connell spilled ashes on his potbelly. "What's this, Midge? You held out on me?"

"It was on the train going to Florida," Midge explained. "Suspect is too strong a word. Rick insisted that he'd nicked the right arm of the woman who had shot at him Saturday night. In the dining car we both noticed that Barr was favoring his right arm while eating."

"And later when I drank with Barr he lifted his glass with his left hand," Rick added. "He was right-handed. Next morning, when he and Nelda got off the train, he carried his bag in his left hand and let her carry her own bag. That was odd for a ladies' man like Barr, who had made a great show of the niceties of gallantry toward women.

"It wasn't much," Midge said. "Barr might have banged his arm, or something. I hadn't Rick's confidence that he always hit what he shot at, especially at night at a couple of hundred feet."

"About one hundred and twenty feet," Rick corrected him.

"All right, one hundred and twenty feet. I'm a cop; I can't assume anything unless I know. Later, on the train, I slammed against Barr's arm accidentally on purpose. Barr didn't turn a hair."

"He had a wound all right," the D.A. said. "But it didn't do more than break the skin and stiffen the arm muscles a little."

"Even if I saw it, it wouldn't have been proof," Midge said. "If Nelda Ware was File's daughter—and it seemed at the time that she was—neither of them would have any reason for killing. And Rick was sure he'd shot at a woman, and Barr wasn't a woman. Then that night Nelda was attacked in her berth, and that definitely eliminated Barr because he couldn't have gotten there and back to his berth without being seen by porters. Deborah File was handiest. Or, for that matter, Rick. Or Nelda had pulled the stunt herself, with or without Barr's advice."

THE D.A. said: "Her story is that she thought you were on the train to shadow her and Barr and she wounded herself slightly to divert suspicion from herself. She insists that she was just nervous; that she hadn't anything to do with the murders and didn't know that Barr had."

Midge nodded. "I believe her. Barr was too canny to let her or anybody else know too much. A murderer is safest when he plays a lone hand. Anyway, there on the train after the attack, I didn't really have anything. For all I knew, the attack didn't have anything to do with the murders. It could even be that Deborah File was nuts over Barr and hated Nelda for cutting in on her time." He smiled gently. "Rick had a notion that the killer might have been on the train in disguise and then gotten off during the night to take a later train to Palm City."

"That wasn't the dumbest notion I had," Rick told him wryly. "Or you either. You were pretty sure the murderer was Sabina Felice."

"You were ahead of me there," Midge conceded. "For a while, anyway. How did you get it?"

"Partly elimination," Rick said. "Consider Camilla Rogers and Eddie Mix. If that combination did any killing, Eddie would be the one to handle the jobs. That was his profession. And the technique wasn't Eddie's. Too imaginative, especially in the pattern of foreign guns. He'd use his own method which he'd used so successfully in the past—walk up to a man and pump him full of lead and walk away. I know at least three men he liquidated like that, and you police were never able to pin the crimes on him."

The D. A. scowled at the memory.

"Eddie had at least two chances to kill me like that," Rick went on. "That is, if he or Camilla were the killer. The first time when May Carter and I came out of the *Courier-Express* building. He could have cut us both down without trouble on that dark deserted street, settling the business then and there. The second time was the following afternoon when his car blocked mine while I was looking for the File house. He was armed; he hadn't any idea that I was. He could have walked up to my car and pulled a gun and put a bullet into my head. There was nobody to see or hear. Instead he didn't go for his gun till I'd hit him with my fist."

"Camilla Rogers could've been working her own game with Reuben Jones," Connell suggested.

RICK shook his head. "Eddie had to be in it. He drove her to the File home. And it was hard to see Reuben Jones killing, or condoning the killing, of Miss Brenda File. He told me so, and I believe him. He was very fond of Miss File. And in the end he gave his life to save me. He saved Deborah, too, but he could have waited until I got it. He hardly acted like a man who was out to kill me.

"Sabina Felice never impressed me as the one. She'd just come to New York from Palm City. It was hard to see how she could have the necessary knowledge about the Files and myself that the murderer obviously had. For example, where Miss File was staying Friday night and where I lived. And how could she have learned that May Carter propositioned Miss File? By the way, that applies also to some of the others. It's very doubtful May Carter, who was scared to death of her, would have told her. And if Sabina's object was to keep May Carter from talking about the letters and the true Camilla File, wouldn't she have shot her before she entered the *Courier-Express* building instead of waiting until she had

a chance to speak to me? That left Joe Barr and Nelda Ware."

"Only if you were blinded by sentiment," Midge said, smiling.

"You mean Deborah File? I couldn't see her killing her aunt."

Rick put his head back against the chair and shut his eyes, half-drowsing suddenly as he sat there, and remembering how last night on the train he had sat up all night in the washroom. Barr, he had known, would be no danger until the train reached New York, so he had gone without sleep because Deborah was on the train. He had preferred to believe that he was merely being extremely careful, for he had been too close to death too many times in the last few days to take any unnecessary chance with the end so near.

They were waiting for him to go on. He roused himself.

"The same applied to Nelda as to Camilla Ware, only more so. She was completely dominated by a man who was very capable of doing his own killing. And, like Sabina Felice, she could not know a lot of things the killer had to know. Barr had a great deal in his favor as the killer. He had the stiff right arm. He had the knowledge of persons and places. He could get his hands on an assortment of unusual pistols, and he could use them with great accuracy. But the fact remained that he wasn't a woman, and it looked as if Nelda really was Anselm's daughter. Mrs. Ware's evidence was rather good. So mentally I was still chasing my tail."

Rick polished his pipe against the side of his nose. "Then Sergeant Midge discovered that the real Camilla File was dead, which gave Barr motive for the murders as strong as any of the others had."

"I'm glad I contributed something," Midge muttered.

"But the killer was a woman," Rick said. "It always came back to that. Or was it a woman? May Carter said it was, but she hadn't seen whoever shot her. The one she feared was Sabina Felice, and when she was shot she assumed that Sabina had shot her. What else was there? I'd caught a flash of a woman in the coupe that almost ran me down outside the *Courier-Express* building; a man had noticed a woman behind the wheel of a coupe that tried again outside the hospital; I'd been shot at by somebody whose face I couldn't see, but who wore the clothes of a woman. The fact is that nobody had *really* seen her. In the sheriff's office, while Sabina was being questioned, I looked at Joe Barr, at his smooth, very handsome face, and saw how easily he could pass himself off as a woman. Reverse the mirror, and the murderer is not a woman after all, but a man."

THE D. A. frowned. "Is that all you had to go on?"

"All?" Rick shifted in his chair. "It's a lot when you connect that up with Barr's knowledge and the people involved and his marksmanship and his stake in the hoax and his sore arm. It formed a pattern that fitted nobody *but* Joe Barr."

"I want facts," the D. A. grunted. "Patterns might satisfy you, but there are a lot of things in between I've got to explain. If you hadn't been so smart, we'd have nabbed him and obtained a confession."

Midge came to Rick's defense. "Or we might have been left dangling in midair with Barr going scot free. Barr was too cagy to leave evidence you could sink your teeth into. I didn't realize what Rick was driving at by the reversed mirror till last night. By that time Sheriff Holt and I had convinced ourselves that Sabina Felice couldn't be the murderer. Every test we gave

her showed she didn't know what part of a gun a bullet came out of, and Holt is clever in his tests. And though she'd been in Palm City for years, Holt couldn't dig up anything to show she'd ever owned a gun or even fired one. Whoever killed May Carter and missed Rick by a hair had to keep in practice. Then I saw what Rick was up to and got a priority to take a plane back to New York. I was at the station, all right, but reached the fireworks a couple of seconds too late. I can't say I'm sorry."

"But there are facts we'll never know," the D. A. persisted.

"Facts?" Rick said. "You've sent many a man to the chair on circumstantial evidence. Here is as good a case as you ever had. This is the only way it could have happened, with only Joe Barr fitting in."

His voice was hoarse with weariness. He opened his eyes very wide to battle drowsiness.

"Deborah File hired Joe Barr to find out about the daughter," Rick said. "Barr located Camilla's foster mother in Dig Center and learned from her that Anselm's daughter had died several weeks before in Palm City and had been buried under the name of Mrs. Camilla Reeves. Barr saw his chance to get his hands on an enormous amount of money. There was so much of it involved that he could induce Mrs. Ware to aid him in defrauding the estate. They found a girl named Nelda who resembled Camilla File in a general way. The resemblance did not have to be too close; Camilla had left Dig Center when she was seventeen and had never returned. Even Mrs. Ware wasn't sure what she looked like at twenty-nine. So Barr came back to New York with the three of them and got set to claim the estate for Nelda."

"We know all that from Nelda's confession," the D.A. said impatiently.

"All right, there's a fact. Then, on Friday, Miss Brenda File phoned Joe Barr."

"Hold it. Did Miss File tell you this when she telephoned you at your hotel Sunday afternoon?"

"NO," Rick said. "She was saving the definite accusation until she saw me, and this would have been part of the accusation of Barr. Because Barr knew that May Carter had phoned Miss File and that she was going to see me. It stands to reason that Miss File must have told him. Deborah didn't because she didn't know. Miss File had been opposed to Deborah hiring Barr; but when she was faced with a situation, she decided that she needed the professional advice of a detective. She had no way of knowing that by doing that she was condemning May Carter to death.

"Joe Barr found himself on a spot. He didn't know who May Carter was or what she knew, except that if she talked it would ruin his scheme to make a fortune. He planned quickly, dressing up as a woman as added protection in case he was seen, and got a Spanish Alkar to put the onus for the murder on me. The flaw was that he couldn't kill her before she went to see me because he didn't know what she looked like. So he hung around the *Courier-Express* building. When he saw a girl come out with me, he had her tabbed, but still he wasn't sure. He tailed the cab uptown. When he saw the girl get out half a block from where Miss File was staying that night, he no longer had any doubt. He shot her.

"He still had Miss File and me to worry about. He terrified Miss File by threatening her over the phone, speaking through a handkerchief so she couldn't recognize his voice. At that time Miss File had no reason to think

the voice belonged to Barr. What he did next is a fact. I called the *Courier-Express* copydesk an hour ago and learned from Benson that after I left the office Friday night Hal Zeller phoned him to learn if I'd filed a story on the File case. At least, Benson thought it was Hal. At this moment Hal Zeller is in the building. He'll tell you he didn't phone. Doubtless it was Joe Barr.

"Barr must have breathed a lot easier when he learned that I hadn't yet written up whatever May Carter had told me, if anything. But I remained a menace to him. I imagine he hung around my hotel, still in his woman's disguise, and saw me leave with Midge. He slipped upstairs and picked my lock and dropped a couple of grams of potassium cynanide into my bourbon. Then he parked outside the hospital to see what developed. When I came out alone, it was too good a chance to waste. It was better than poison. Death by apparent accident is always safer than death by murder. So he tried to run over me.

"WELL, I wasn't dead of an accident or of poison when he saw me the following afternoon. Perhaps he wasn't worried about me any more. It seemed plain that May Carter hadn't even told me as much as her name, else the police would know it and whatever else there was. Then that evening he met me at the File cottage in Westchester, and his worrying started all over again. He pretended to drive back to New York, but he parked nearby and waited among the birches for me to return. He changed into female clothes in case anybody glimpsed him from the window. You know what happened then. In a way Miss File's death was my fault, for I could have stopped him then and there. But I still thought he was a woman and had sentimental notions about damaging females, even lethal females, with bullets.

"Next day, Sunday, he could no longer delay springing Helda as the daughter. There were too many other claimants bobbing up. But he knew that was dynamite as long as Miss File lived. She could add. She had told him about May Carter and May Carter had been killed a few hours later, and now Barr had come up with his own claiment. So right after the interview in his apartment that afternoon, he went to Mrs. Homer's house on West Eighty-First Street, where he knew Miss File was staying. She came out. Wearing women's clothes again, he followed her down to the subway and shot her with a Swiss Chyleswki."

Connell nodded. "That checks. Nelda admits that Barr induced her to alibi him for Sunday afternoon. She claims he insisted that he was innocent, but that the police would make it hot for anybody without a alibi on general principles."

"So there's another fact," Rick said. "Well, there it is. Barr didn't make another attempt on my life till the end. He was too smart to go in for unessential killing, and by that time he realized that I couldn't know much. Then Tuesday night I made that crack in the sheriff's office about reversing the mirror to get a true picture of the killer. He knew what I meant, of course. I said then I didn't have evidence. He might have believed me, or thought I was playing my own game, perhaps to write a final exclusive for the *Courier-Express* with what I had. At any rate, he couldn't afford to let me live. His method of murdering Miss File in the subway had gone off so smoothly that he considered it worth a second try. He knew I would take the subway to go uptown to my hotel. He was waiting in those women's clothes with a Belgian

F.N. .32 in his hand covered by the coat. I was ready for him."

THERE was a silence. Rick wondered if they would let him go right to bed when he reached the camp.

The D.A. clucked his tongue. "You are a most foolhardy young man."

"You want evidence. What better evidence can you ask for than finding him with a gun in his hand?"

At this side Captain Connell said in bewilderment: "You're not like the Rick Train I knew, risking your life to make things easier for the police."

Rick turned his head. "To hell with the police! It makes me uncomfortable when people try to kill me."

"Is that all it was, Rick?" Midge looked at him with his pale eyes crinkled at the corners.

So Midge knew. Midge knew that much of this reasoning could have applied to Deborah as well. She could have learned about May Carter from her aunt. She had knowledge and opportunity and a certain amount of ability to shoot straight. That was what had been tormenting Rick on the train coming back with her—the terrifying one chance in a hundred that it wasn't Joe Barr after all.

But it had been Joe Barr, and everything was all right now. Everything was fine. He wondered where Deborah was.

"I can't say that I approve of your method, Train," the D.A. said in a tone that was not displeased, "but I must say that you got results."

Rick glanced at his watch. "In an hour I have to leave for the induction camp. May I be excused?"

OUTSIDE, in the hall, the newspapermen were waiting for Rick. He found it rather pleasant to be at the other end of an interview for a chance.

Suddenly he broke off in the middle of a sentence. "Sorry, fellows," he said. "The D.A. will give you the rest."

"Rick!" Hal Zeller cried as if he had been stabbed in the back. "You can't do this to your fellow Guild members."

Rick said, "No comment," and pushed through them. Deborah File was coming up the hall. Her smile wrapped itself around his heart and shortened his breath. His tiredness dropped from him.

"You've been waiting for me?" he said.

"I thought you'd never come out." Cozily she tucked her hand through his arm. "There's so little time left."

A flash bulb flared. Ignoring it, they moved down the hall toward the elevators. He did not take his eyes off her.

"I never realized how short an hour is," Rick said.

She squeezed his arm. "There will be furloughs."

"And some day the war will be over," Rick said.

THE END

★ MICROFILM SAVES LEGAL DOCUMENTS ★

THE process of micro-filming used in speeding letters via V-mail to the armed forces in far-off posts has found favor with the state of Illinois as a handy means of preserving legal documents. Since the law requires that certain state-county records be permanently kept, this scheme will serve as a limitless "Fountain of Youth" for records presently reaching the stage of deterioration and illegibility. It is anticipated that this process will also be of great value in making available much storage space so rapidly being consumed by accumulating court-trial records, payroll vouchers, etc. The micro-film method has already proved its potent and desirable qualities, because thus far it has resulted in the saving of from five to ten percent of bulk.

Locked in a closet, sentenced to die—it was a tough spot for a smart dick. What good could a book do now?

IT'S IN THE BOOK

By E. E. HALLERAN

JOHNNY BROOKS was pretty sick when he opened his eyes, but he didn't move his cramped legs until he took stock of his situation. That was partly natural presence of mind and partly a matter of constant practice. Since going on the plainclothes squad, Johnny had lived his job every minute. He studied, practiced and studied some more until the boys at headquarters kidded him all the time. Johnny Books, they called him, the Text-book Dick.

The big fellow had taken it all good naturedly and now the training stood him in good stead. He didn't groan or make any other sound which would betray his awakening.

Some of the sick feeling passed away and he ventured to straighten the cramped legs as far as they would go. Only then did he discover that his hands were manacled in his lap. A murmur of voices came from somewhere near at hand and Johnny held his hands still, careful to keep the bracelets from clinking.

Waves of pain throbbed at his temples but he was able to piece out the taunting memories. He had followed squatty Joe Pietro, only vaguely suspicious of the man's actions and unwilling to mention the matter to any of the other boys. Pietro had quit the rackets years ago and Johnny would only be asking for the needles if he worked up a false alarm over the ex-mobster.

It had been easy enough to follow Pietro to the old house at the edge of town. Every furtive movement of the man had added to Johnny's growing suspicion, and several times he had been tempted to speak to a passing harness bull but each time he passed up the chance. He had tailed Joe around to a back door, then . . .

It had been so easy that he had never considered the possibility of another party shadowing the pair of them. That had been foolish—not worthy of a smart dick who read all the books. Now he was in a mess.

Holding his hands tightly apart so as to keep the handcuffs from clattering, he took stock of his prison. His back was against a wall, the square shoulders tight on either side. His feet seemed to be touching another wall. Evidently a small closet, a thread of light on his groping hands indicating the location of a door crack.

HE shifted with elaborate caution. He couldn't see anyone in the lighted room but the voices now came through distinctly as he laid his ear against the opening. Pietro's whining voice was protesting. "We oughta scram. If that dick was wise there'll be more of 'em on the prowl. No use riskin' our necks."

"Don't be a fool!" a hard voice said. "That Brooks kid just got curious over the dumb way you were acting. Nobody else is wise. Just carry your little bundle like it was your laundry and stop shaking!"

The hard voice seemed familiar to Johnny but he couldn't quite place it.

He knew he had stumbled on something big but what did it get him? . . . A stuffy closet and a lump on his thick red head!

The voice became a bit sharper. "No slips now! Any weakness and you will be eliminated before you can harm the cause. Now repeat your instructions so that I may be sure you understand."

The tone seemed to scare some of the whine out of Joe. "I'll do all right," he blustered—not too convincingly. "I leave here at nine o'clock. I walk down Main Street and turn off on Third. At nine-twenty I'm near the railroad yards. At nine-thirty I slip the bundle under the culvert at the south end of the yards. Then I cut across lots and go to Cleary's Pool Room. I stay there."

"Excellent," the voice approved. "Make yourself conspicuous at Cleary's so you will have a good alibi for the moment when the explosion comes. Even if the troop train is not on time we'll tie up the distribution yards for the best part of a week. If the train is on time . . ."

Johnny Brooks took a deep breath as the scope of the plan beat through his headache. A sabotage gang—and he was helpless!

"Suppose somebody stops me?" Pietro asked, some of the worry coming back into his voice. "I ain't had a rod since the last time the bulls picked me up. Rods are hard to get nowadays."

The other man laughed scornfully. "What would you do with a gun? Your game was pineapples! However, if this will give you any more guts, take it. I've another automatic just like it downstairs. Don't use it unless it's absolutely necessary. Just because it's equipped with a silencer is no reason for you to get careless."

Johnny kept his ear to the crack as he worked himself erect in the narrow cubicle. Cold anger was making him forget the throb in his head. He had to make some sort of an attempt to break up this murderous scheme!

"Ten minutes to wait," he heard Pietro say. "Who's takin' care of the dick?"

THE other man laughed. The sound gave Johnny Brooks a chill. Not only did it promise an untimely end for a hard working young detective but it identified the unknown plotter. Nobody laughed like that but Al Imhoff, editor of the *Times*. A man like Imhoff could do endless damage unless he could be unmasked quickly. Johnny Brooks had to stop something more than a single bombing plot.

"Don't worry about young Book-dick Brooks," Imhoff laughed. "I'll show him something that isn't in any of his precious instruction sheets—if that tap on the head didn't already fix him. When I walk out of here he'll be finished. A charred skeleton won't show any evidence of strangulation."

Johnny made his decision quickly. He had been weighing his chances of tackling Imhoff after Pietro left but he knew it was a forlorn hope. Imhoff was too big a man to handle while manacled. The best chance was to make the break now and hope for the best. It was a desperate risk but it was better than waiting to be killed in cold blood.

He pulled his knees up in front of him, braced his back against the wall and heaved with both feet. The rickety door gave way with a splintering crash and Johnny went down, unable to get his feet under him in time.

Imhoff cursed angrily and Pietro lifted the Luger which he was holding in his hand. As Johnny scrambled to his feet the silenced weapon was already swinging to cover him.

He lunged as the weapon came to bear—but his move was to the right, not

at Pietro. There was a muffled *plop!* and then Brooks changed his course, this time diving into Pietro, the manacled hands swinging out ahead of him.

The gunman fumbled stupidly with the weapon for just an instant, then the handcuffs crashed into his face and the two men went down in a whirling tangle. It was desperate work but Johnny had the psychological edge. He knew what he was trying to do while Pietro was still trying to defend himself with a gun that wouldn't fire.

Johnny snatched the automatic quickly and rolled free just as Imhoff charged in with a blackjack. Manipulating the gun with both hands Johnny fired up at the big man—then rolled frantically again to avoid the falling body.

Once more he worked the gun in his manacled hands, his second shot smashing Pietro's shoulder as the dynamiter closed in with a knife.

Pietro went down howling and Johnny scrambled to his knees. "Shut up!" he growled. "You make my head ache worse than ever. Where's the key to these bracelets?"

Pietro writhed fearfully but managed to indicate Imhoff. Johnny watched carefully while he went through the dead man's pockets but it was quickly apparent that Joe wasn't faking. The squatty man hadn't been too sturdy a conspirator in the first place and he was thoroughly licked now.

Johnny selected a key from the bunch he found in the dead saboteur's coat pocket and in a few seconds he had his hands free. Then he waved the gun at Pietro. "Brace up, Mussolini! We've got to get word to the bomb squad. I don't know how long that bundle of yours is set to be harmless but it better have some quick attention."

DETECTIVE CAPTAIN TRENT came into the drug store where Johnny Brooks was gulping a Bromo. "Pietro talked plenty," he grinned,—"not that we needed much talk after we'd gone through that house. Joe felt awful sorry for himself at first but then he decided to act tough. He claims he would have fixed you proper only his gun missed fire."

"It wasn't the gun; it was him," Johnny chuckled. "I gambled on him missing. Joe's no hand with a rod and greenhorns most always shoot to the right when they're excited. I dodged to his left and he missed."

"Fine!" Trent was faintly sarcastic. "That came out of the book, I suppose?"

"Yes sir."

"And I suppose the book told you that Pietro's gun would jam after the first shot?"

Johnny Brooks grinned. "His gun didn't jam. I used it. It killed Imhoff and stopped Joe, didn't it?"

"Sure. But how come Joe couldn't . . . ?"

"Most automatics won't work with silencers on 'em—unless you operate the slide action by hand after each shot. Pietro didn't know that—but I did. I read it in a book."

A NEW CRIMINAL WHIMSEY

THE unveiling of a new racket occurred in Chicago recently when it was discovered that the ingenious mind of the interested criminal had worked out a novel scheme for making money by labeling himself as "agent" of a bank and soliciting new accounts from several large companies. To make the offer attractive and in order to induce a sizeable down payment, the newly established "agent" offered various premiums in the shape of pen-pencil sets, electric razors, etc. For any who might be tempted to succumb to the soft persuasions of such charlatans, let us point out that banks do not hire representatives or solicitors for new accounts work.

AUNTY LOVES A

By G. T. FLEMING-ROBERTS

Aunt Coral was determined to prove her neighbor was guilty of some crime —even if it had to be her own murder!

WHEN Minta had gone with the supper tray, Miss Coral Rice reached down at the side of her invalid chair and with agonizing effort got the planchette and its board into crippled hands and then onto her slight lap.

"Ridiculous thing!" she said of the planchette.

So it was. Ancient forbearer of the ouija, it was nothing more than a heart-shaped piece of thin wood fashioned by some tongue-in-cheek nineteenth century craftsman. It was supported at two points by casters and at a third by a vertical pencil. At light contact of the hand the planchette would move, seemingly of its own accord, while the pencil leg recorded its absurd antics on the paper-faced board beneath. The result was—spirit writing . . . or sheer bosh?

Coral Rice had reached a point in her dabbling with the occult where it was most convenient to decide upon sheer bosh.

"Stuff,' said she, "and nonsense!" She batted the planchette with the back of her hand—a move she immediately regretted because of the pain it awakened in her arthritic knuckles. The planchette scurried under the impact, fell with scant sound to the thick carpet, left in its wake a straight pencil line that rose diagonally through the ugly word scrawled across the paper on the board.

The ugly word was *murder,* and the planchette, under Coral Rice's hands, had written it in shaky script that afternoon at dusk. She had turned it sideways and up-side-down in an effort to make something else of it, but the word remained *Murder* with a capital *M,* and she didn't like it.

"Because," she muttered, "it dovetails too well with yesterday."

Yesterday she had been sick at her stomach for the first time in years. Dog-sick. Her doctor's explanation, "Something you've eaten," was as inadequate as it was obvious. He had given her bismuth and a simple sedative to take on retiring, and that night she'd dreamed about the unpleasant little man next door.

He rented the house next door from Coral Rice and his name was Winkler. Coral had compared him to a vicious little poodle because of shaggy, sandy

To her horror, the knob came away from its shank. Escape was impossible!

hair and eyebrows. He had an unruly mustache that provided him with a likeness of a muzzle, and he always gnawed the bit of his aluminum-shanked tobacco pipe as though it were a bone.

During the two months that Winkler and his sullen brunette wife had tenanted the house, Winkler had made barking complaints about dripping faucets, slow drains and stuck windows. But there was another part of Winkler that wasn't like a cocky little pup.

Winkler was something else. His snarling, noisy pompousness served as a disguise for the Mr. Hyde in him. Winkler tiptoed in the dead of the night and listened furtively. In the warmer evenings of September, Coral Rice had heard his whispered footsteps on the lawn and the crackling of the hedge as he stole through into her yard. What the devil was he up to?

Twice, recently, when she had looked across at the darkened living room window of the house next door, she had seen the glint of moonlight on lenses. Field glasses. Winkler was always spying.

She had told Richard—Richard Beem, her bachelor nephew—about Winkler's spying, and Richard had given her that come-easy laugh of his. Winkler, said he, was maybe a little queer . . . She'd told Henry—Richard's elder brother, a widower—and Henry had replied vaguely: "You read too many detective stories, Aunty."

"Slinking little cur!" Coral Rice said of Winkler, and recalling her dream of last night she shuddered like taking bitter medicine.

A LIGHT footstep sounded in the hall. Coral Rice's glance crossed the big bedroom that was somber with the age of things she had gathered about her. A mischievous twinkle came into her bright black eyes, and she again addressed the discredited planchette.

"You're just Ouija. The years haven't earned you an ounce more respect than I get from my two nephews and that brat Stephany!"

Stephany Beem, Henry's motherless daughter, opened the door. She was twenty-four, blonde, strikingly beautiful in her Red Cross uniform . . . "Beautiful," thought Coral Rice, "but not too obviously aware of it, thank God. Doesn't strut her sex."

Stephany tried a show of pique by arching her brows and flaring the nostrils of her perfectly straight nose, but there was a give-away twitch of a smile about her ripe mouth.

"So I'm a brat today. Only yesterday I was a tart. Coming up in the world, aren't I, Aunty?"

Aunty sniffed. "Sneaks never hear any good of themselves."

Stephany crossed the room carrying a half-gallon tin container. "Here's the cleaning fluid you want for your hideous old furniture. Dad says its non-inflamable, even smothers fire, so you won't go up in smoke like the rest of the old witches. Want me to stay home from the Center tomorrow and help?"

Coral Rice shook her gray head. "I have to keep busy." She lifted crippled hands significantly. "I don't want this thing to make a mummy out of me."

Stephany sat on the arm of a chair and lighted a cigarette. She stared through half-closed eyes at her grandaunt and nodded. "I know. I smoke too much and my skirts are too short."

"Quite so." Aunt Coral moved painfully forward in her chair. Her gaze went to the casement on her right and out through the dark toward the house next door. "What ever happened to that police detective who used to come and see you, Stephany?"

"He's around, I presume." Stephany's voice put up a cool wall between

her private affairs and her aunt's curiosity. Her blue eyes shifted to the detective magazines that practically wedged Aunt Coral into her chair. She laughed. "Paddling in gore again!"

"Don't change the subject. Why isn't Sergeant Mike Keller dating you any more?"

Stephany's eyelids lowered. She began swinging a long, slim leg. "Now Aunty, you can't expect me to marry an ordinary policeman just because you like a good murder."

"Huh! Adding snobbery to your other faults, are you?"

Stephany's blue eyes sought a way out of the corner and pounced upon the planchette board. She got up, snatched the board from her aunt's lap, looked at the writing, and laughed buoyantly.

"Don't," her aunt said crossly. "I asked that idiotic thing what Winkler was up to with his spying, fully expecting to learn you've been careless about your window shades. That wasn't the answer."

"Murder!" Laugher convulsed Stephany. She dropped back into her chair and her jeering eyes peeked over the planchette board. "That little muskrat? Darling, you *pushed* the planchette!"

"Of course," Aunt Coral admitted. "Pushed subconsciously. That word 'murder' is a summing up of subconscious processes. And it dovetails with my being sick yesterday and last night's dream."

Stephany rolled her eyes upward. "Swami Rice! She dream-reads!"

Aunt Coral stamped her foot, which brought a twinge of pain into her leg. She said, "Dem it! Listen a bit, girl. I dreamed that Winkler came into this room through a casement off the sundeck. He sneaked over to my bed, then prowled around a while, and went out again. . . . Stop laughing, you giddy fool!"

STEPHANY stopped. Her grandaunt pointed a crooked finger at the casement on the opposite side of the room. It opened onto the flat top of a porch that stretched along the south side of the house. Like all the other windows in the house, this casement was equipped with a hinged screen on the inside. Veiling the screen was a curtain of white marquisette. This curtain didn't hang straight down like the others in the room. It was caught fast between the window frame and the edge of the hinged screen.

Stephany got up, crossed to the window with the caught curtain. She then turned back to stare soberly at her aunt.

"That window," said Coral Rice, "hasn't been opened by anybody who'd have a right to open it in three weeks. It means somebody *did* come in that window last night. The catch is broken and has been for some time. When Winkler went out again, he got the curtain caught in the screen."

"But—but you said you dreamed ——"

"When you're under the influence of a narcotic, who's to say how much is dream and how much reality? I tell you, Winkler was in this room last night and up to no good. The curtain is proof."

Stephany shook her head. "Maybe Uncle Richard was out on a binge and couldn't find the keyhole. So he climbed the wrought iron to the porch roof, came in your window——"

"And went out again?" Aunt Coral sniffed contempt for the theory. "No, it was Winkler. I *saw* him." A sharp arthritic twinge made her wince. She motioned with her head toward the heavy Jeffersonian chest-on-chest. "Get

me my pain capsules, girl. Top left drawer."

Stephany went to the chest. "Why didn't you scream?"

"I couldn't, dem it! That sedative had a heavy hand on me."

Stephany closed the top left drawer, tried the one on the right. She said, "You've misplaced those capsules."

"Don't be ridiculous! When you have as much trouble moving about as I do, you don't have two places for anything."

Stephany looked again. "They're not here. Maybe you're out of them."

"I'm not!" The quickening of Coral Rice's pulse was not a flare of temper. "Your father bought me a fresh box night before last. If they're not in that drawer, somebody's taken them."

Stephany turned, eyes large and troubled. "That's not sense."

"But if they're gone, that's what Winkler was after." Coral Rice considered pounding the arm of her chair, but thought better of it. But her voice pounded emphatically. "Winkler was in this room last night. He's up to something. Murder."

Stephan, who was neither imaginative nor impressionable, nevertheless had a note of anxiety in her voice. "But—but who would he murder?"

Aunt Coral stirred impatiently in her chair. She thought of her inexplicable stomach upset of the day before.

"How would I know? Got to find out before he does it. Me, possibly. Though why he didn't just strangle me last night——" She paused, brought her voice down out of an excited treble. "Stephany, why not call up Sergeant Mike Keller and ask him over?"

The girl stiffened. "I won't." Her eyes narrowed and she nodded slowly. "Now, Aunty, I begin to understand. It was quite Machiavellian at first, but now your little plot is perfectly transparent. You made it up about Winkler, even planting clues. You think you'll get me to call Mike to come down here and investigate a phony murder that hasn't happened and never will. Well, I won't fall for that or Mike Keller either. And I wouldn't call him if he was the last cop on earth and Winkler was about to slit your precious throat from ear to ear!"

STEPHANY boiled out of the room and slammed the door. Coral Rice stared after her with bright black eyes and chuckled dryly. "In love with him, aren't you," she murmured. Then she reached for the phone on the chair-side table, dialed police headquarters, asked if Mike Keller was in. He was.

"Mike," she said, when Keller got on the line, "this is Miss Coral Rice. I wish you'd drop by the house tonight. And stop at a drugstore on your way, will you, and pick up a box of A-C Pain Capsules for me?"

Mike Keller took an audible breath which he rationed out again with a few well-chilled words. "Miss Rice, you are correct in assuming that the police are public servants. We protect you from robbery, murder and mugging. We silence loud parties, rescue pet cats and discourage small boys from vandalism. But our service does not extend to running errands.

"All right!" she shrilled. "So I've been burgled—burglared——"

He'd hung up. Sergeant Keller of Homicide, an insolent whelp if there ever was one, had hung up in her ear. She fumbled the receiver into the hook while her black eyes space-stared. For the first time in her life she felt exactly like an old lady with arthritis.

CHAPTER II
Somebody Digging

RICHARD BEEM'S easy laugh sounded from the doorway to bring

Coral Rice out of a black mood. He said, "I used to think Cupid was a fat little kid with his tummy in a sling. Aunty, you disillusion me."

"There is," she grumped without looking at him, "more eavesdropping around here than goes on in a rain barrel."

Richard chuckled. "What would you do if you heard your only aunt call the cops—stuff cotton in your ears?"

He came all the way into the room, a middle-aged man of medium height and build, as dark complexioned as Satan. His bright slash of a smile must have quickened the pulse of many a woman while his own heart-beat had never been seriously impaired by feminine charm. He was lazy, selfish and probably a bounder, but having him around affected his Aunt Coral exactly like a subscription to *Esquire*.

Neither Richard nor his brother Henry was a mental giant. They operated a small real estate and insurance office, but had little property of their own. They seemed content to share the security that belonged to Aunt Coral. Not that Aunty minded. Richard had lived with her for twenty years, fifteen of which had been spent in the five room house next door that was now rented by the unpleasant Mr. Winkler. Then, when Henry's wife—Stephany's mother—had died, Coral had bought this larger house and invited Henry and Stephany to join them.

"I wasn't," Aunt Coral said, "merely trying to get Mike Keller here to patch up his differences with Stephany."

"No?" Richard Beem had mastered the art of always appearing the attentive listener. He came to the chair vacated by Stephany, sat down, moved the can of cleaning fluid with his foot.

"Richard, I need a good leg man."

"A what?" His frown was nearly as charming as his smile.

"Leg man, leg man!" she said impatiently. Her crippled hands indicated the magazines on either side of her. "They all have them—all the detectives you read about. Somebody to run around and pick up clues——"

Richard's deep laugh came rolling out like potatoes from a barrel. "Aunty, you're killing me! What wants detecting?"

"A murder." She watched the laughter iron out of his face.

"Who's murdered?"

"Nobody—yet. It's just that I think Winkler's up to something."

Then she told him of the dream that wasn't a dream and about the caught curtain and missing capsules. All the while Richard smiled, but tolerantly.

"Now, Aunty," he said when she had concluded, "stop and consider. Why would Winkler steal a box of capsules that can be bought in any drugstore for twenty-five cents?"

"Why would he prowl around and spy? Why would he look into our windows with field glasses?"

"Well, Stephany's a beautiful girl." He laughed, a trifle lewd. "Winkler can pick 'em—if you've noticed Mrs. Winkler."

"Pah! That sultry brunette?"

Richard patted her knee. "You were once a sultry brunette yourself . . . Now look, old girl. Let's forget it. I'll tell Dr. Wilson never to give you a sedative again. Last night you kicked the gong around——"

AUNT CORAL wasn't listening. She leaned forward in her chair, parted the curtains across the casement. A car had stopped in front of the house next door.

"Richard!" she whispered urgently. "Get the lights out!"

"Now who's spying?" He stepped to the table lamp, plunged the room

into smothering dark, joined his aunt at the window. A woman got out of the car, took crisply clicking steps up the short approach walk. A man's figure followed, after closing the car door.

"Winkler," Coral Rice sighed. "I can always tell because no matter how dark it is there's always a stray ray of light to catch on that shiny aluminum shanked pipe of his."

"You sound disappointed, Aunty," Richard's voice mocked out of darkness.

"Uhm—maybe. Sometimes, when Winkler's out late and his wife is home alone, it's another man who comes to the house. He doesn't have a shiny pipe."

"Possibly Mrs. Winkler has a brother."

Aunty snorted. "For a man of the world, Richard, you can be awfully demmed naive at times!" She stared across the separating strip of lawn and watched the lights of the house go popping on and off. First it was the porch light, then the garage light, then the upstairs hall, and finally the living room light. The latter stayed on. Coral Rice could account for the confusion about lights in the house next door. There were no less than five switches mounted on the plate in the vestibule.

"What does Winkler do for a living, Richard?" she whispered.

"I don't know."

Through the vestibule windows of the Winkler house, Aunty could see no part of Winkler except his legs as he tramped up the steps.

She said, "You rented him my house without finding out what his occupation is? That's fine business. . . . Turn on the lights."

Richard stumbled over the can of cleaning fluid getting to the lamp. He turned it on, and the up-thrust beam from the lamp shade top made him squint. "I didn't make out the lease. Henry did. And Henry collects the rent, passing it on to you. But I can tell you this: Winkler's not an ex-bootlegger or gangster like the villains you read about. This is darned disappointing to you, but he used to be a city building inspector."

"Dear! As prosaic as that, eh?" She examined her nephew's face, found it faintly clouded as though by unpleasant recollections.

He said, "He lost his job when a firetrap tenement he'd okayed burned down on the south side. A couple of children were burned, remember?"

"That building you owned?"

He nodded, gnawing his lower lip. "So I don't go near Winkler. I dislike thinking about those two kids. I don't—" he turned away—"even care to discuss the man."

It came to Coral Rice in an inspirational flash that maybe Winkler was a pyromaniac. Maybe he'd fired the tenement. Maybe he had stolen into her room last night to set the house on fire . . . No, that couldn't be. Her mind stopped struggling with the possibility. But there was *something* wrong with Winkler—something slimy, evil and secreted.

She said to Richard as he went out: "You might send Henry in if he's not busy."

HENRY BEEM had spent a good half of his life going to fat, and the hall trembled slightly under his approaching step. He appeared in the doorway, a massive but ineffectual figure of a man in bathrobe and slippers. He had three loves—food, ease, and his daughter Stephany. Since Stephany was quite able to take care of herself, none of his passions were in conflict.

"Want me, Aunty?" He yawned,

passed a hand up over his blunt features to shove gold-rimmed glasses onto a convoluted forehead.

"About Winkler," she said. "What does he do for a living?"

Henry Beem scowled as he plodded ponderously back through the inner recesses of his brain to produce an answer. "I just don't believe I ever discussed the matter with him. Groceries? Was it groceries he was in?"

"It wasn't!" Aunt Coral snapped. "Don't try to make something up. You don't know and you never asked, did you?"

He shrugged. "He pays his rent, so what's the difference? Pays on the dot. Paid day before yesterday, I remember, because I stopped and picked up the money on my way from the drugstore. Which reminds me, the Winklers want new wall paper."

"They won't get it! You tell Winkler for me—— No, don't tell him anything. You wouldn't get it straight. Just let it go. *Let it go!*" The shooing motion she made with her frail twisted hand was enough to send the massive Henry lumbering back down the hall.

Alone, she sat perfectly still in the chair. Henry had stopped at the Winklers' day before yesterday on the way from the drugstore. Henry had been out to buy Coral Rice a fresh box of anti-pain capsules. The following day, Aunt Coral had been sick. Dog-sick. And that night Winkler had stolen the capsules. Winkler knew, of course, every move that went on in the house, what with his spying and talking with Henry. Henry pumped as easily as a well in wet weather.

She nodded. It all dovetailed. Beautifully. Last night, she'd been the victim of an unsuccessful murder. A fine thought to take to bed! She discovered she was attempting to see on all sides of herself at once, as though she expected the walls, like those of Poe's room, to begin gradually closing in upon her. And somewhere behind the complicated mechanism for driving her to death, was that busy little cur from the house next door.

"Stuff and nonsense!" She shook off the delusion. Exactly why, if Winkler wanted her dead, hadn't he killed her in her helplessness of the night before? Why was it that Richard, Stephany and Henry would accept none of her ideas about Winkler? Was she, after seventy years of knowing and owning her own mind, becoming like many other old ladies, just a wee bit—*peculiar?*

Minta, the colored maid, came in after a while to see if Coral Rice wanted anything. She didn't. Her self-sufficiency amounted to a vice, she knew; but she insisted on undressing herself and hobbling about unaided. After she had turned out her light, she went to the casement nearest the Winkler house, opened it a little way, and set the check-arm. Since oil rationing, she had slept with the windows closed, but tonight it seemed tremendously important that one was open. Because if Winkler left the house next door, there was a good possibility that she would hear him open or close the door. She'd be forewarned, at least.

She had thought sleep out of the question, but then she hadn't taken into account the pleasant anesthetic of chill October air. She was startled out of her doze by an undefinable sound, and lay there with wide-open eyes, shivering in the darkness.

Chonk-scuff.

IT CAME again from next door to be repeated twice before it was torn out of ear-shot by a soughing wind. Somebody digging. She got out of bed —a process that required a long half

minute before she could endure the pain in her joints. She found slippers, her heavy robe, and stout cane. She went over to the open casement to listen for a repetition of that sound. But there was none.

Somebody digging. She thought of basements and the innumerable corpses that had been buried therein, and a quick thrill raced along her bowed back. There was within her a spirit of high adventure that at the moment made her oblivious to danger.

No light in the house next door. No light anywhere except from the street lamp at the corner, and it was reduced to a starlike twinkle by distance and the thrashing of intervening trees.

She moved to the door of her room, grasped the knob with her palm because of stiffened fingers. Sliding one foot in front of the other while her cane made scarcely a sound she moved quietly down the hall, stopping now and then to listen to the quiet that lay about her like the dark.

She took the stairs one step at a time while the banister creaked in its support of her. She crossed living room, dining-room, went into the kitchen where she paused to look out through the window above the sink. This window commanded a view of the rear of the Winkler lot next door. There were evergreens and shrubs, the latter shorn of their foliage by the October gusts, all crouching like any number of menacing figures, and any one of them could have concealed a murderer or his victim.

She went out the back door, carefully down the three concrete steps with the blast of the wind pressing her robe close to her body. On the level, she turned toward the hedge that separated her own yard from the one next door. Her mouth sagged open, gasped at cold air.

"You—— Who——" she whispered hoarsely.

The hedge ripped wide before some dark and frightening figure crashed through with dark garments wind flaunted. Coral Rice raised her cane in an arm that seemed suddenly to have gone to lead. Her backward step, unfortunately, landed her on a pebble that pressed up against the thin sole of her slipper to the sensitive metatarsal region of her foot. Arthritis, that old enemy as insidious and slinking as Winkler ever was, stabbed her cruelly. Without the cane as a prop, she crumpled down like a puppet deprived of its strings, to hit her head on the steps.

But before the impenetrable and soundless dark closed over her, she was aware of a faint sweet breath of perfume that was quickly wiped away by the wind.

CHAPTER III

Evidence of Murder Done

THEY were all standing about her bed—Stephany, Henry, Richard, and Dr. Wilson. They were all talking to her except Henry, who looked as though he was trying to think of something to say.

Stephany: "Aunty, whatever were you trying to do?"

Richard: "Next time you go out on a drunk, let me know."

Dr. Wilson: "There now, Miss Rice, it's not a bad bump."

She looked at them, one at a time. Henry looked as though he'd been sleeping in his clothes. Richard had bags under his eyes and a whisky breath. Stephany looked brightly awake and competent. Dr. Wilson resembled a school teacher with a whole roomful of bad boys.

She said, "What happened? I fell——"

"Now, now," admonished the doctor. "Don't talk."

"She'll talk," said Henry, which wasn't the most thoughtful remark he could have made under the circumstances.

Richard, at the head end of the bed, rested his hand on her pillow. "You were lying at the back steps when I came home. Out cold. I'd been taking on a little, and there was a moment there whether I didn't know which of us was going to carry the other upstairs."

"There was somebody digging," Aunt Coral told them. "I heard it in my room and went down to investigate. Somebody came springing out of the hedge and—and I fell——" Her gaze shifted to Stephany whose robe was dark. She sniffed, sampling the sweet scent that Stephany used. She frowned, made a mental note to write to the editor of her favorite magazine and protest the use of perfume as an identifying clue. Her personal opinion was that you couldn't tell one perfume from another unless they were bottled and sampled for comparison. Or was that a convenient mental process for eliminating Stephany from her private suspicions?

"Digging?" Henry said, slow enough to divide the word into syllables.

"Yes. In our back yard or the Winklers' next door." Coral struggled to sit up, but Dr. Wilson put a firm hand on her shoulder.

"Now, now, Miss Rice. Three or four days in bed and you'll be good as new. The bump isn't everything but we're not risking pneumonia."

"Three or four——" she gasped. "I will like—like hell!"

"Aunty!" A veritable chorus.

Her eyes darted. "Listen, all of you. I heard somebody digging. Winkler. People dig gardens and basements and graves, but only one of them at night!"

They all exchanged glances like trained seals bouncing a ball. They infuriated her. Thought she was having hallucinations, did they? Well, let them. Let them all wake up with their throats cut! Winkler was probably a homicidal maniac and dug graves by the dozens. His basement probably resembled the French catacombs. . . .

"Miss Rice," Dr. Wilson was saying. "Your two nephews and myself are going out into the yard and investigate. If we find there has been any—any digging, we'll inform you at once. But you must take our word as final."

"Our yard, and the Winkler yard, too," Coral Rice insisted. "And, Dr. Wilson, I'd appreciate it greatly if you'd stop treating me like a psychopathic case!"

THE doctor flushed slightly and led Richard and Henry from the room. Stephany remained, seated on the foot of the bed. Her large blue eyes were softly sympathetic.

"You believe me, don't you, Stephany?"

"Of course, darling. You heard somebody digging."

There was clock-tick silence in the room for a time. Then Aunt Coral spoke again: "Stephany, when I was sick the other day, I think somebody tried to poison me."

"Poison you?"

Coral nodded on the pillow. "The evidence, the—the vomitus—" the word gagged her a little— "gone down the drain, of course. There could have been poison in my pain capsules. And they've been stolen."

"But, darling, why? Aunty, you don't think anyone here——"

Aunt Coral chuckled dryly. "Never can tell. Wouldn't think either your father or your uncle would trouble

themselves with murder. They're too lazy. But then I have provided for you all handsomely in my will. And aside from this demmed arthritis, I'm healthy. I'm harder to kill than a trumpet vine. Could be someone is tired of waiting."

"Aunty! But you said it was Winkler in your room last night."

Aunty chuckled again. "Now I know how to get some action around here. Accuse you all of murder, and by the Lord Harry you'll all start agreeing with me about that sneaking Winkler!"

The footsteps of the searching party sounded in the hall. The three men trooped in, Dr. Wilson in the lead. Coral Rice could read the answer all over their smug faces, but the doctor wasn't to be robbed of a triumphant announcement.

"Miss Rice, I am happy to inform you that there are not the slightest signs of any—er—digging in either your yard or the one next door. Not so much as clod of clay on the lawn. And now will you promise to be good and go right to sleep?"

Miss Rice, deceptively meek, promised. Richard was the last to leave the room, and before he turned out the light he exchanged winks with her and whispered: "I'll play leg man for you any time, Aunty."

Coral Rice turned her head on the pillow, took a deep breath that was fresh air and seemed reminiscently laden with the scent of upper Michigan forests where she had vacationed as a child. She went quietly to sleep.

Minta brought her breakfast at ten in the morning, and she nibbled at toast and drank three cups of coffee. When the maid returned for the tray, Aunt Coral was sitting on the edge of the bad.

"I'm getting up, Minta," she said decisively. "You'll have to help me with my clothes because of my bruises. If Dr. Wilson thinks I'm going to lie here and let arthritis make a mummy out of me, he ought to have his head examined!"

It took her forty minutes even with Minta's help, but the important thing was that she made it. As soon as she could shuffle over to her chair by the window, she got hold of the phone. She dialed the telephone number of the house next door. It was Mrs. Winkler's sultry voice that answered with an affected "Uhmm . . . hello."

"It's Miss Rice, Mrs. Winkler."

"Yes?" Was there a preceptible tightening of that gin-husky contralto?

"I've decided to let you have your wall paper," Coral Rice said. "If you and your husband will go down to the Indiana Decorating Company at once, before I change my mind, and pick out what you want——"

"Mr. Winkler is out of town," replied Mrs. Winkler. "Business you know. He travels, you know. And I haven't the remotest idea when he'll return."

"Oh——" Gone out of town, had he? *Scared* out of town. "Well, Mrs. Winkler, you can pick out wall paper without his help, can't you?"

"Oh, yes. Poor Claude wouldn't know one shade from another. I was going down town anyway this morning——"

"Fine!" She hung up, put the phone down, then leaned forward in the chair to wait and watch. Not ten minutes later, Mrs. Winkler put in her appearance at the front door, dressed in a smart dark suit, a silly chip of a hat, and silver fox furs. Mrs. Winkler closed her door, tried its lock three times, stepped quickly to the porch steps where she stood poised for a precipitous moment. She gave the door a furtive, backward glance, went down the steps, and all but dived into the Winkler car.

CORAL RICE again picked up the phone. She dialed the number of the real estate office that Richard and Henry operated, asked the office girl for Richard. The girl said she was sorry but neither Mr. Henry Beem nor Mr. Richard Beem had yet put in an appearance.

Miss Rice racked the receiver. Then she went through the whole painful business of unbending out of her chair, shuffled across the room, got the door open, and looked out upon Minta who was sweeping in the hall.

"Is Richard around, Minta?"

"Don' think he is, Miss Rice. Think he left fo' the office two-three minutes ago. Oh, Mistah Richa'd! Oh, Mistah——"

"That will do, Minta." Miss Rice moved to the door of Henry's bedroom, knocked, and entered before she got an answer. She caught Henry making a fast move—fast for Henry. He was slipping something — she couldn't see what—under the cover of his dresser. She pretended not to notice. She ignored the fact that Henry's complexion, as he faced her, took on the unhealthy appearance of a piece of raw suet.

She asked, "Has Richard gone to the office?"

"Why — ah — yes. Sure." Henry smiled feebly. "Just went. I'm going right now, too. Stephany's gone to the Red Cross, and—and I guess you and I overslept a little, huh, Aunty?"

"As soon as you get to the office have Richard call me. Remember now."

"Sure will. Say——" Something seemed to dawn on Henry. "Sa—ay, you're not getting up, are you?"

"Henry," she replied acidly, "if you'd get your mind out of the purely horizontal plane for a moment, you'd wake up to the fact that I *am* up. I've got work to do, if you haven't!"

Henry seemed reluctant to leave his room. He made a great fuss about searching for cigarettes, but Aunt Coral's presence in the room prevented him from looking for them under the linen dresser cover. He left, finally, and as soon as he was gone, Aunt Coral returned to Henry's room, went straight to the dresser.

She did not, however, immediately lift the edge of the dresser cover. From force of habit, she had approached the dresser with her eyes reaching out through the window next to it—reaching toward the house next door. There on the sill of the Winkler dining room window, the bright October sunlight glinted on something metallic and shining like the barrel of a gun. She squinted, shook her head. It couldn't be. Winkler had gone out of town, or at least a temporary address. And yet the shiny thing on the window sill seemed to deny all that.

She turned, mentally cursed the slowness of her pace as she went back to her room. There she searched the drawers of the chest-on-chest until she found her opera glasses that hadn't been out of their case since *Tobacco Road* had first played Indianapolis. She carried the opera glasses back to Henry's room, stood at the window, brought the shining object in the Winklers' window into focus.

The thing was Winkler's aluminum-shanked pipe. No doubt of it now.

"Take a bone from a dog!" she muttered. "Dem it, he *must* have left in a hurry!"

THEN she remembered Henry's little deception, turned to the dresser, felt under the cover. She pulled out an open envelope that had evidently come in the morning's mail. It bore a local postmark, had been mailed late the previous night, but carried no return address. She thought, too late, of finger

prints.

Coral Rice ballooned the envelope, shook out the contents—a half sheet of note paper bearing small crabbed script. She read the single line:

"Unless you accept my terms immediately, the police will receive evidence of murder."

Coral Rice's pulse quickened as her eyes followed along the line of script. Now—*now* they would believe her. There *had* been murder done. There *had* been digging in the night. Somewhere around here was an undiscovered corpse——

But wait a minute. Why send a note like this to Henry. Henry, a killer?

"The most unlikely person," she muttered, then shook her head. Who had been murdered? Who had written the threat note? Winkler? She had never seen the little man's handwriting, but the demanding tone of the note was typical of Winkler. But then she supposed all blackmailers were demanding. But Henry . . .

"Poor Stephany," Coral Rice whispered. And then as she carefully slid the blackmail letter back beneath the dresser scarf, her flying thoughts alighted on another possibility. The figure that had burst from the hedge last night, that feminine figure—had it been Stephany? There would be grounds for blackmailing Henry if Stephany was mixed up in murder.

She was startled by the ringing of telephones, upstairs and down. "I'll get it, Minta!" she called to the maid, and then made what haste she could out of the room. She barked her toes on the can of cleaning fluid Stephany had brought. "Dem!" she said, and dropped into the chair to strangle the clamoring telephone.

"You're damn well supposed to be in bed!" Richard Beem's deep voice rolled from the receiver.

"Richard——" She paused, gathering scattered wits, catching a breath. She swallowed a throbbing lump in her throat, forced her voice down to an even keel. "Richard, I've arranged for Mrs. Winkler to be out of her house for a long time. I want you to come right out and search the place."

"Search the Winkler house?" he protested. "Now, Aunty. In broad daylight? How the devil would I get in?"

"You're a fine specimen of a real-estate man!" she said witheringly. "Use your pass key."

"Sure, but what if somebody shows up—Winkler or his wife?"

"Mrs. Winkler is picking out wall paper. Winkler's out of town——" She hung that last in the air, remembering the pipe on the window sill of the house next door. "That is, he's supposed to be out of town, though I can't conceive of him going anywhere without that pipe. He may be hiding some place. You be careful about that, Richard."

"Yes, but supposing I carry out this harebrained scheme of yours, just what am I supposed to be searching for—a body?"

"I—I don't know. That's a possibility. You could look for signs of fresh concrete work in the basement. But mostly, see if you can find my box of pain capsules anywhere. And listen, Richard, there's no 'supposing' about this. You'll do as I say, or I'll break a will over your head!"

"Oh-oh," he said, and hung up.

RICHARD was thirty minutes getting up from the office. He came walking briskly along the sidewalk from the bus stop, turned into the front yard of the house next door as though he lived there. On the front steps, he looked up toward his aunt's window and saluted quickly—or maybe it wasn't a

salute. Aunt Coral chuckled dryly, watched him unlock the door. Richard, she noticed, had the good sense to wear gloves.

Winkler and preceding events had lent the house next door a sinister aspect. It swallowed Richard in one piece like a ravenous ogre, and only once did she see a sign of him in a sunlit window during a period of sixty-five minutes. Just about the time Coral Rice began picturing Richard a bloody "X" on the bathroom floor, he reappeared at the front door, looked both ways, then cut across the lawn to the Rice house.

Aunty Coral was shivering with excitement as Richard came into her room empty-handed, a scowl drawing his black brows together. She gripped her cane and pounded with it on the floor.

"Well, out with it, man. What did you find?"

"Guilty as hell," he said soberly and drew from his coat pocket a flat box about six by nine inches—a hosiery box, as a matter of fact. "Mrs. Winkler hoards nylons."

"Stop clowning, Richard. What—what's in that thing?"

"This I found tucked carefully away beneath the spoon drawer in the Winkler buffet," he said. "Of all places, after I'd looked for loose tiles in the fireplace and tapped the walls for secret doors." He opened the hosiery box like a magician producing a rabbit from a hat. Inside, held in the exact center by cardboard strip separators that somebody had glued in place, was a box of A-C Pain Capsules.

"My pills!" Aunt Coral crowed. She reached for them, jerked her hand back as she remembered about finger prints.

"And," Richard said, "all due apologies to you for my not taking any stock in your theory. Winkler must have slipped in here the other night and swiped these. Exactly why he disguised them as hosiery, I don't understand. Don't see what he wants with them."

She said, "I took one day before yesterday. That was the day I was sick. Richard, I want you to take these capsules to Sergeant Mike Keller at Police Headquarters. Have him put them through the laboratory and tell him I suspect somebody tried to poison me."

"Okay, Inspector!" The smile ironed out of Richard's face. "And when I get my hands on that Winkler, he'll wish he'd never been born!"

CHAPTER IV

Homicide Hotfoot

CORAL RICE'S afternoon was uneventful in comparison with the morning. To keep herself occupied while awaiting developments and at the same time remain in a position for watching the house next door, she cleaned the overstuffed chair near the window.

Stephany came home from the Center at three to give Aunt Coral a good scolding for not being in bed. Then Stephany went to her own room for a nap because she had a class in nursing that night. Richard came from the office at a little before four to report that he had delivered the capsules to Mike Keller and told Keller about Mr. Winkler's nocturnal prowling.

"What did Keller say?" Aunt Coral asked, straightening away from the chair on which she had been working.

"Said he was going to pick up Winkler for questioning regardless of what the capsules contained," Richard replied. "And say, young woman, be careful how you rub that wool upholstery with that cleaning stuff. I've heard of friction igniting cleaners and burning people."

"This won't," she said. "Stephany

says its a good fire extinguisher. She ought to know, what with all she's learning about incendiaries and war emergency. . . . Did Keller say when he'd come and tell me about the capsules?"

Richard shook his head, grinning knowingly. "Playing Cupid and Sherlock Holmes in one and the same costume would stump anybody but my Aunt Coral. Well, back to the grind. Henry and I have a bunch of those Federal Rent Control forms to take care of and I don't think we'll be home for supper."

Aunt Coral replaced the top of the cleaning fluid can—not tightly because she'd had a painful time getting it off—and dropped into her chair to once more consult the planchette. She asked, "Where is the body?" and then, "Whose body?" And to both questions the planchette traced answers in sanskrit, or something equally as obscure to her.

"Which only demonstrates the confusion in my mind," she explained to herself. For of course she pushed the planchette. She asked, "Is Henry guilty?" and the planchette started to write "Stephany," which was probably a product of Coral Rice's pity for Stephany if Henry *was* guilty.

"Stuff and nonsense!" she said and once more discarded planchette as a means of solving life's complicated mysteries.

The supper hour came and went, and she had Minta bring the tray upstairs; there certainly wasn't any sense in her going downstairs and eating alone. Then, too, she wanted to keep an eye on the Winkler house, for Mrs. Winkler had not yet returned.

It was seven-thirty and dark when her listening ears caught the sound of footsteps on the walk. She leaned eagerly forward, parted the curtains, saw the figure of a man hurrying up the approach walk of the Winkler house, carrying a queer little satchel, the like of which she hadn't seen anyone but the family doctor of forty years ago carry. At first, she didn't think the man was Winkler. Then, as the figure paused on the porch to unlock the front door, she caught a glint of something metallic in the man's mouth. Winkler's pipe. But just how had he managed to return to the house and get it? Did he have two pipes exactly alike? A distinct possibility, she thought.

The door opened and closed. The light in the upstairs hall switched on, and Coral Rice stared down through the vestibule window of the next house to see pant legs and shoes go tramping up the steps. Winkler was back. Coral Rice reached out a crooked hand for the telephone, hesitated. If only she could be sure about Henry, one way or the other.

She stared across at the Winkler house, saw shoes and pant legs come tramping down the stairs. Then the upstairs hall light went out, the door opened. Again she caught the glint of Winkler's pipe and watched the man hurry down the approach walk, turn left to be shortly lost in the shadows. But this time he had not been carrying the funny little satchel.

NOW what? She reached for the phone, and this time dialed it—the number of the real estate office. It was Henry's slovenly voice that answered.

"I want Richard," she demanded.

"Stepped out to a restaurant," Henry said. "Ought to be back any moment, Aunty. Want I should have him call?"

"Yes. As soon as you see him." She started to hang up, but Henry was hemming and hawing.

"Er—ah, Aunty, there's something I'd like to talk to you about. Ulp . . ."

"Well?" This sounded like money. And if it *was* money, then somebody was blackmailing Henry.

"Well, I guess it can wait until I get home," Henry said weakly. "'Bye, Aunty."

Ten minutes . . . twenty . . . twenty-five ticked by on the clock before the phone rang. Coral Rice seized it so eagerly that she hurt her swollen knuckles again, but excitement was a counter-irritant for the pain.

"Richard—— Is this Richard?" she asked eagerly.

"Uh-huh, your wayward nephew back from eating fish which is all the restaurants give you——"

"I'm not interested!" she snapped. "Richard, you're to come home immediately. Unexpected developments. Winkler's back. And gone again."

"Now wait a minute. Which is it—come, or gone?"

"Come *and* gone," she said. "He didn't stay a minute. He entered his house carrying a funny little satchel—the kind the old family doctor used to have. He took it directly upstairs, left it, and went out again. He's gone now and his wife hasn't come home yet, so the house is empty. I want you to find out what's in that satchel."

"Lord, Aunty!" he protested. "Probably not a darned thing but his shaving equipment."

"I doubt it. I doubt it very much indeed. Nobody would be seen traveling with a bag like that. It's a doctor's bag, I tell you—one of those long flat satchels." Which opened up an entirely new realm of possibilities in her mind. Perhaps, like the Cleveland Butcher of historic crime, Winkler dismembered his victims.

"Hurry, Richard," she insisted. "Use Henry's car and dem the gasoline!"

And "dem" the tires, too, the way Richard came sliding up to the curb in front of the Rice house a flat fifteen minutes later. He didn't come in, but cut across the front lawns to run up onto the porch of the Winkler place. Aunty saw his shadowy form vanish into the house. The beam of a flashlight that he was carrying stabbed up the stairway an instant and then went out. She saw the firefly flicker of it once again through a second story window before her attention was demanded in another quarter.

A CAR swung around the street corner and began slowing down and edging over toward the curb. Aunty stopped breathing. She rose half out of her chair, only to fall back again as pain jabbed up through her hands and into her supporting arms. The car had come to a complete stop, directly in front of the Winkler place. Somebody got out, started up the approach walk. A woman. Mrs. Winkler.

Coral Rice took a shallow breath. "Richard," she whispered into the silent room, "if you've never used that handsome head of yours before, use it now!"

Mrs. Winkler had the door open. Lights went popping on and off all over the house until she had vestibule and upstairs hall lights on. Aunty Coral watched and took up lip-gnawing. Mrs. Winkler was going upstairs. And where was Richard? Was he cornered?

As though to answer Coral Rice's silent question, there was a tiny show of flashlight beam, but this time on the lower floor, in the living room.

"Quick, you idiot. Out the back door!" Aunty couldn't see the Winkler back door from her window, but in as much as Richard didn't appear at the front door, she could assume that he was making his escape at the rear. "Or he's having buck fever and can't move at all!"

She waited immeasurable seconds before she heard her own back door open and close. Richard's footsteps sounded on the lower floor and then on the steps. Aunty took a deep breath, frowned, and began sniffing. An odor, something like that of a blacksmith shop, was preceding Richard along the hall.

"Wow! I won't have to shave for a week!" he said, and then came into Aunt Coral's room lugging—the satchel?

Only it wasn't a satchel. It was about the size of the old family physician's bag, but the end elevation of it was a squat triangle with rounded corners. It was made of iron, grill-worked at the ends, while the sides were completely covered in worn green carpet. There was a square metal handle at the top by which Richard held the thing for Aunty's inspection.

"Richard, where in the world did you get——"

"It's a stove," he said, his grin coming between gasps. "I can see where it would look like a satchel from a distance, but it's some sort of a stove. It was sitting right in the middle of the upstairs hall, and I didn't get a chance to investigate it, so I just grabbed it and ran. Did you ever see a stove like this before?"

"Stove?" she snapped. "Don't be an idiot! That's my old charcoal footwarmer."

"Your what?" His black eyes stared incredulously.

"Footwarmer. You wouldn't remember. Horse and buggy days. I'd forgot such things existed. I recall now that I stored it in that cubby hole under the eaves in the attic of the place next door. When we moved over here, I guess I just forgot to clean that cubby hole out. See that little drawer at the end? That extends full length and you fill it with glowing charcoal—" She paused, sniffing the unmistakable odor of heated iron.

"Richard, is that thing going? I mean, is there a fire in it?"

"Sure. Footwarmer, eh? Hotfoot." He started to chuckle. He carried the footwarmer to the side of Aunt Coral's chair and put it down on top of the planchette board. "Henry said that Mrs. Winkler has been complaining to him about the low oil ration allotment, but a footwarmer—that's practically primitive."

"Richard, why would Winkler bring that thing into the house lighted and leave it sitting in the upstairs hall? Answer me that?"

He scowled, shook his head. "Only I think somebody ought to go over there to the Winkler house and put the cards on the table."

Aunt Coral nodded. "That's right. You go over there and tell Mrs. Winkler I want to talk to her. Right now. I don't think oil rationing has anything to do with this. It's part of a plot."

Richard started for the door. "I'll get her over here."

"No, wait. Don't leave this footwarmer here. Take it——"

RICHARD had taken half a step back when from the house next door, keening through two solid walls and closed windows, came the shrill scream of a woman. Aunt Coral twisted to the window. It looked as though every light in the Winkler house was going. Richard muttered, "What the hell?" and legged for the door. That door and the front door both slammed behind him and there was an incredibly short interval between. Aunt Coral saw him flying across the front lawn to bound onto the Winkler porch and get the door open.

Pwuff. The sound, something less than an explosion, brought Coral Rice

around in her chair to stare down at the footwarmer. Ruddy oil flames were coiling out of the iron grill end of the footwarmer, licking across the carpet pile to convert it into a nest of squirming black worms of charring wool.

It was an odd thing that before she made a move either to avoid the flame or smother it, Coral Rice decided definitely about Winkler. Winkler was a fire-bug. A pyromaniac. Probably, when he'd been a building inspector for the city, he'd started half the fires in town. He was still starting fires, even with footwarmers.

And then she grasped her cane, got out of her chair. The footwarmer was an incendiary bomb, of sorts. Civilian defense instructions said to pick the incendiary up with a long handled shovel. She made a cool effort to hook the handle of her cane through the handle of the footwarmer. She succeeded, lifted the blazing thing a foot off the floor. Now what? If she carried it into the bathroom and dumped it into the tub, chances were the back-draft would carry the flames to her clothing. She put the footwarmer back on the planchette board, saw its flames take hold of a fresh piece of carpet. Come, come, this wouldn't do.

Then she remembered the cleaning fluid can standing not three feet away. Stephany had told her that far from being inflammable, the stuff was actually an extinguisher. She took shuffling steps to the can, picked it up, pulled the cap off with her teeth. She turned the can up, dribbled cleaning fluid on the burning carpet. A vaporous white cloud smothered the flame. She sprinkled more of the stuff, working towards the center of the conflagration until nothing was burning except the footwarmer itself. Then she turned the can upside down to drench the footwarmer with the entire contents.

There was an angry hiss of liquid striking hot metal. Flames vanished beneath the smothering cloud that rose chokingly about Coral Rice. The smell of a blacksmithy was gone, and in its place the odor of a damp hay field. Hay? *Wet hay?*

She turned blindly toward the window. She lurched, hands outstretched to strike the casement. *Must not breathe,* her mind lectured. *Wet hay. Deadly danger. Air, for God's sake, give me air.*

Her hands groped up the window, found the latch, pounded at it with the heel of her palm. The pain in her hands sickened her. The hammering of her pulse was thunder in her ears. The casement gave way with a suddenness that all but pitched her out of the window. She lolled over the sill. Locked lips parted; thirsty lungs drank deep of the biting chill air.

"Help! Richard, help me!" She got that out before a paroxysm of coughing seized her.

CHAPTER V

For Rats Only

"I DON'T know what I'm going to do with you, young woman."

Coral Rice looked up from bed at a grave and scolding Dr. Wilson. "Humph! Never felt less like a young woman in my born days."

She looked about her. She had been moved into Richard's room. Stephany was there, back from the Red Cross Center. And there was Richard and Mrs. Winkler. The word "sultry" with which Coral Rice had described Mrs. Winkler's type of beauty was particularly apropos at the moment. She seemed to have reached the saturation point, for she was weeping quietly on

Richard's shoulder.

"What were you screaming about, Mrs. Winkler?" Coral Rice demanded.

"Nun — nothing." Mrs. Winkler rocked her head back and forth. "I'd found the back door standing open and I thought there was a prowler in my house."

Richard said, "Aunty, I told her who the prowler was. I told her about Winkler and the footwarmer. She tells me Winkler is a fire-bug."

"Ha!" Aunty was triumphant.

"There was," Richard continued, "one of those war-time plastic capsules of cigarette lighter fluid mixed in with the charcoal—a sort of timed incendiary, delayed action torch. If you hadn't had the presence of mind to douse it with cleaning fluid———"

Dr. Wilson's grunt cut Richard short. "Been better if she'd let the house burn down." He wagged his finger. "Young woman, that cleaning fluid was principally carbon tetrachloride, a good enough fire extinguisher if you don't throw it on certain hot metals, including hot iron. What you actually accomplished was the chemical reduction of carbon tetrachloride to carbonyl chloride, a deadly poison gas, known to the army as phosgene. There was a warning about that in the papers not long ago."

"Smelled like wet hay," said Aunty, nodding.

"And just one good lungful, Aunty—" Stephany shook her head gravely.

Aunty sniffed her contempt for chemistry. "Where's Henry?"

Richard looked blankly about him. "Say, I guess nobody called him. I suppose he's still working at the office."

The front doorbell rang, and Aunty told Stephany she'd better get it, because Minta had gone to the movies. She grinned at Dr. Wilson. "Things would go to pot around here without me to do all the thinking."

"Then I'd think you'd take better care of yourself," Dr. Wilson returned gruffly.

Stephany returned breathlessly to the room, her face flushed, and brow furrowed. "It's *your* policeman, Aunty."

Aunty raised her head from the pillow. "Send him up, child. Bring Mike Keller here at once. I've got to talk to him about my capsules. The rest of you clear out, d' you hear?"

"Miss Rice, I protest——" began Dr. Wilson.

"Bother your protests and get out. You, too, Richard, and Mrs. Winkler."

"Miss Rice, I won't be responsible. I certainly won't," said Dr. Wilson. "You must remain quiet until I find out if any damage has been done to your heart."

"Bother my heart. Get out, dem it!"

THEY got out. Coral Rice lay back and relaxed. She chuckled. "I'm harder to kill than trumpet vine," she murmured. Then she turned her head toward the door to beam a smile at a tall, lop-eared redheaded man in a neatly pressed brown suit.

"Hello, Mike," she said. "Been making an ass of myself."

Mike Keller closed the door, came to the bedside, squatted, then drew a chair beneath him. He scowled at her.

"About that box of headache capsules, Miss Rice. Your nephew, Richard Beem told me about this man next door—this Winkler. About how you believed he stole this box of capsules from you and how Richard entered the Winkler house to recover the capsules. You take any of this medicine?"

She nodded. "Day before yesterday. It was a fresh box. My nephew Henry got them for me at the drugstore. They're harmless things—just aspirin and caffein."

Mike Keller kept scowling. He shook his head. "Not these. There were eleven capsules in the box and all of them contained powdered squill."

Coral Rice gagged. "No wonder I was sick. I hate fish!"

"It's not fish. You're thinking of squid. Squill is the powdered bulb of a lily. It's rat poison."

She wasn't surprised. "Look, this man Winkler has been spying on everybody in this house. Window peeping. And he's been pumping Henry. Henry's an easy-mark. Winkler would know about my taking these pills. As a matter of fact, Henry got the capsules at the drugstore the other night, and on his way home, he stopped at Winklers' to collect the rent. Winkler was trying——"

"I said *rat poison,*" Mike Keller cut in. "With you or any other human, as small a quantity of squill as that wouldn't be poison. It would make you——" Mike didn't like the word either. "It would act as emetic."

"Ugh!" She shuddered. "I can verify that!"

"Funny thing is," Mike added, "that anybody who bought squill under its rat-poison trade-name would know the stuff wouldn't kill a human except in large quantities. It's for rats only. Anybody trying to throw a scare into you?"

She shook her head. Somebody was trying to throw a scare into Henry, she knew, but didn't mention that to Mike Keller.

"I'm hard to scare, Mike."

Keller said, "The way that pill box was mounted inside a hosiery box——" He shook his head some more. "Today, I dropped into the real-estate office and got sample finger prints of your two nephews. Henry's prints were on the pill box, but his buying the capsules explains that. I suppose the other set of prints would have to be yours."

"Naturally. Henry's and mine. The killer wouldn't leave his." And then Coral Rice told Mike Keller about the footwarmer that had turned out to be an incendiary.

"And," she concluded, "Winkler's wife claims Winkler is a fire-bug."

Keller made a loop in his lower lip and sucked on it. He said, "If the footwarmer was stored in the attic cubby-hole of the house next door, how come Winkler was parading up the street with it?"

"Maybe he took it with him to get charged with charcoal," she suggested. "Then he brought it back, ignited it, and left it."

"Could be." Keller stood up. "Well, looks like we've got to pick up Winkler. I'll get his description and maybe a picture from his wife." He went to the door.

"Say, wait a minute," Aunty checked him. "What's your candid opinion of my grand-niece Stephany?"

Keller's scowl deepened. "A fine girl, in her place. I haven't got a place for her, that's all."

"Tut! Don't be such a dope. She's in love with you?"

"Yeah?" Keller, skeptical but eager to believe, waited in the door. "She tell you so?"

"Same thing as told me. Said she wouldn't call you if you were the last policeman in the world and Winkler was about to cut my throat. But don't let romance interfere with your doing your duty. Get Winkler."

DR. WILSON established something of a record for himself by keeping Coral Rice in bed for three days while he made twice-daily checks on her heart. At the end of that time, he was willing to agree that she was harder to kill than trumpet vine. She returned

to her room, spent an hour that evening in her chair, fooling with the planchette. She had learned through Stephany that the police still lacked any knowledge of the whereabouts of Mr. Winkler. The whole dizzy problem had Mike Keller baffled.

The following morning, after Stephany had left for the Center, Coral Rice asked Minta to send Henry into her room. Henry arrived eventually, puffy with sleep and as yet unshaved. Aunt Coral told him to sit down. He sat as though he had spoiled eggs in his hip pockets.

She asked, "How soon do you have to have the money?"

"Huh?" Henry's face was once more raw suet, and his brow and upper lip began to show the dew of nervous sweat.

"The money," she said, "to prevent Winkler from taking evidence of murder to the police?" She watched Henry gulp. "Look here, my lad, the night you stopped at Winklers' to collect the rent, you left that box of pain capsules you'd just bought for me, didn't you?"

"Ulp—uh huh," Henry admitted. "I had to go back for them later. I guess it was an hour later."

She nodded. "In that hour, Winkler emptied out the contents of the dozen capsules, refilled them with some rat and mouse poison he had around the house. You didn't know about that. You brought the capsules to me, I took one the following morning, and I got sick. Winkler was watching. He couldn't have missed my getting sick, because I was sitting right in this window when it happened. That night, he sneaked into my room through the window and swiped the box, being mighty careful not to get any fingerprints on it. Then he put the squeeze on you."

"Squeeze?" Henry blinked.

"Blackmail, you dolt! He had the box of poisoned capsules with your fingerprints on it. Evidence of murder, he called it, to throw a scare into you. You were more afraid of me than the police, I'll venture."

Henry moistened his lips. "Winkler said you'd disinherit me and maybe even Stephany."

She nodded. "Probably would have, too. I thought that was Winkler's game. It just came to me this morning, while I was wondering why Winkler had mounted that capsule box so carefully inside the hosiery box. He did that so the fingerprint impressions wouldn't get smudged. Mostly for the effect on you, though. No one but a dope would scare on such grounds as that anyway."

She waved her hand toward the door. "Next time anybody tries anything like that on you, come to your aunty. You haven't the wit to pound sand in a rat hole. Go on. Go to work. Everything's been taken care of."

Henry stood up, huge and helpless. He blinked at her and his eyes were moist. Suddenly, he stooped and smudged a thick-lipped kiss on her forehead. Then he fled from the room.

AUNT CORAL sat there motionless in the chair for a few minutes. She heard the front door close behind Henry, heard his car start. She could hear Richard stirring around in his room. She drew a long, tremulous breath, and called: "Richard!"

His footsteps sounded in the hall, then he opened her door far enough to flash his smile at her.

"Come on in," she said. "You're in no hurry to get to work."

He came in and closed the door slowly. He turned, came over to sit down in the chair opposite her. Aunt Coral stood up, leaning on her cane,

shuffled to the middle of the big bedroom, turned to face him.

"When are you going to marry Mrs. Winkler, Richard?" she asked.

His smile ironed out. His dark eyes grew flat and a little chill. "Marry Mrs. Winkler?" He laughed. "Won't Winkler object?"

"Don't think so. I know what Winkler is besides a sneaking little blackmailer."

"What?" he asked sharply.

"A corpse," she snapped. "He's the body that's around here somewhere. He's been a body ever since that night I heard digging."

Richard paled but slightly. His smile came fitfully.

"I heard digging," she went on. "I went down to investigate. Mrs. Winkler was standing guard, watching for intruders while you disposed of the body. She came lunging out of the hedge at me. I always knew that somewhere in the world there'd be a woman who could bring out the best or worst in you. There was. She sat down right next door to you."

He shook his head. "You do me an injustice. Mrs. Winkler happens to be a—a pleasant incident."

She eyed him sharply. "Then Winkler was blackmailing you, too?"

He nodded. "The tenement building fire in which those two kids were trapped, remember? Winkler lost his job. He kept mum about the bribe I paid him to okay that building. He's been bleeding me pretty steadily."

"I see. Because those two children lost their lives when the place caught on fire, the grand jury would have certainly treated you pretty harsh."

"What would you have done?" he asked. "Changed your will to cut me out, if you had known my bribing a public official resulted in those two children losing their lives?"

"Right," she said. "You're a rotter."

"And you appreciate the fact there won't be time now to change your will?"

Her eyes needled him. She nodded, slowly. "I don't want that much time —only enough to solve one good murder. I know where the body is hidden. It's buried beneath some of the evergreens in back of the Winkler house. I know, because when I came to in bed, after I'd fallen at the back steps, your hand was pressed against my pillow. When I turned over to go to sleep, there was an odor like the forests of upper Michigan. I didn't have sense enough to add two and two then, but that made an impression on my subconscious. That smell of pine woods came from pine tar on your hands. You'd lifted the evergreens by their branches in order to plant Winkler's body beneath."

"That's r e m a r k a b l e reasoning, Aunty," he said quietly.

"Then the attempt with the footwarmer," she continued. "That came the following night, after Winkler was dead and buried. You'd found the footwarmer when you were searching the Winkler house for the pain capsules."

HE SAID, "I knew it was there all the time. I remembered having seen it there once when we lived in the Winkler house and I was searching the attic for something."

"All right. How did you get it out of the house?" she asked. "Set it out the back door, didn't you, because you knew I couldn't see the back door from my window."

He nodded. "I put it beside the steps, picked it up that evening after dusk."

"Because," she explained, "I had to see you carry it into the front door after dark. You carried it in and you had Winkler's pipe in your mouth."

He shook his head. "The pipe busi-

ness worried me. You'd seen it on the window sill of the Winkler dining-room. I was afraid to move it."

"You should have buried it with Winkler."

He nodded. "A bad error there. But when I carried the footwarmer into the house, I put my silver pencil in my mouth."

"I see. It glinted like Winkler's pipe. Anyway, I had to see the footwarmer go into the house so I'd become curious and phone you to investigate. You carried the footwarmer in, and then you made another error."

He frowned. "What was that?"

She chuckled dryly. "You turned on the upstairs hall light without any hesitation. Both Mr. and Mrs. Winkler have trouble distinguishing those five switches in the vestibule of the house next door. You picked the one for the upstairs hall without hesitation. After all, you'd lived in the house fifteen years, the Winklers only two months."

"I see."

"Then you left the footwarmer in the upstairs hall. Was it lighted then?"

He nodded. "I didn't add the charge of lighter fluid until I brought the thing over to you. Couldn't have it going off premature."

"Well, you left the footwarmer, came out, and went back to the office where you found a message from Henry for you to call me. You hurried back —— Let's see, you must have paused long enough to telephone Mrs. Winkler, because she had to get home in time to scream at the right moment. Because once you'd left the footwarmer in my room, you had to have an excuse to leave in a hurry.

"Trouble with me, Richard, I didn't give you credit for knowing all that chemistry. You knew I had the cleaning fluid at hand. You knew that cleaning fluid was a fire extinguisher, and you knew that in contact with hot metal it released a poison gas. I had the cleaning fluid and knew it was an extinguisher. All you had to do was supply the hot metal and the flame to be extinguished."

"It was all in the papers not a month ago," he said. "I'm no genius." He looked away from her and out the sunlit windows. His brow was puzzled. "It would have been an accident if it had worked."

She chuckled. "I'd have been killed in the course of investigating a murder —my own murder. And Winkler's murder, too. When it didn't work—not fatally anyway—the blame was tossed to Winkler with Mrs. Winkler's confession that her husband was a firebug . . . . You know, Richard, you're down in my will for property totaling well over three hundred thousand dollars."

He nodded. "That's about what I figured." He kept staring out the window, his brow tightly knotted. "For three days, I've been trying to think up another—er, accident. They don't come easily."

"Was Winkler's death an, er, accident?"

"No. I think they call it a blunt instrument," he replied coolly. "For an anesthetic. Then strangulation." He turned toward her now, came forward a little way in his chair. "Simple and sure. But that was after dark. It's broad daylight now."

She turned her back on him and shuffled to the door.

"Minta!" she called.

He said, "Gone after groceries," in a quiet, flat voice.

SHE seized the doorknob, gave it a wrench. It came off in her hand, leaving an inch of shaft sticking through. She turned slowly, the knob

in her hand. An icy chill coursed along her bowed back. She didn't want to see Richard's face. She stared down at the knob, helplessly.

"I thought that might happen," he said, "the way you have to hang on a doorknob to twist it. Last evening when I saw you fiddling with the planchette, I thought maybe what you call 'the subconscious processes' were at work. So I was up early, before you awakened, and did a little business with the knob set-screw."

She still didn't look at him. He was close. She could see his shadow lying along the floor, moving steadily toward her. She knew he'd been trying to think up another 'accident' and failed. When she saw the shadow of his hands outstretched, the fingers spread like talons, she knew it was to be like Winkler—strangulation.

She took one backward step and flung the doorknob at him. A clean miss. The doorknob went crashing through the casement. Richard whispered tauntly, "That settles it. It's got to be fast!" And she closed her eyes as his fingers closed about her throat.

The world was suddenly all darkness and crashing noise. Coral Rice felt herself whirling out from the rim of a spinning world to come to a bouncing stop in her own bed. It was like coming out of a bad dream—but slightly worse. Her spinster bedroom had been invaded by four men, three of whom wore the blue and brass of uniformed police, while the fourth wore brown and was named Mike Keller.

She stared at the ceiling then and listened to voices and footsteps.

"Get him?"

"Sure."

"Dead?"

"As a doornail."

"Miss Rice——"

She smiled faintly.

"No, don't try to get up. You're okay?"

She said, "I'm harder to kill than trumpet vine."

Mike Keller bent over her. His homely face was pale, its muscles taut. "It's all over."

She said, "You were listening out there in the hall all the time?"

He nodded. "We pussy-footed in about the time the maid went out. I said to the boys, 'She's alone with him now. We'd better watch it.'"

"How—how did you know it was Richard?"

"The fire-bug story sounded thin. A fire-bug doesn't leave an incendiary and then go away. He sticks around to watch the fire. And then that Winkler woman looked like a pretty smooth piece of goods and she went in for crying on Richard Beem's shoulder in a big way. I guess I didn't have much. Just hunches. But I tell you, Aunty——" Some of the color flooded back into his face.

"That's n i c e, Mike. M a k e it 'Aunty'."

"Well, anyway, what I heard when I was out there in the hall, your explanation and all, that was as smooth a piece of deduction as I ever heard of. You had him and you had him with his —you had him cold."

She said, "I always did love a good murder."

★ **"ANYTHING BUT THE TRUTH"** ★
By BRUNO FISCHER
Another Story by the Author of "Murder Wears a Skirt" in the August Issue of Mammoth Detective on Sale May 16th

MURDER BETWEEN DANCES

By FRANCES DEEGAN

Life in a dime-a-dance joint is complicated enough without bringing in assorted gun-fights and murders!

"THERE they are, the bums,' Rose said. "About time they showed up." She tossed her red curls and settled back in her chair as if she hadn't been on pins and needles for the last hour.

I looked out at the crowd with butterflies in my throat. I saw Larry ambling toward the hostess stand and Don was right behind him, tall and dark and smooth, just as I remembered him. It seemed like ages ago, but it was only a week since they'd visited the Paradise for the first time, and promised to come back.

"Hold it, Babe!" Rose hissed. "Don't leap on the guy. Mike's sitting right behind us."

I turned around. Mike Stiegel, the big ape, was posed there like a heavyweight eunuch, watching over the harem and bulging out of his tux as if he had pillows stuffed in with him. He used to be a truck driver before he got to be manager at the Paradise Ballroom. He could be very profane if the hostesses didn't act "refined."

The head hostess gave us the nod and we stepped primly off the platform.

I grinned up at Don and couldn't think of any of the smart things I'd been planning to say all week.

He just stood there and grinned back at me. "Hello, angel-face," he said.

"Well," Larry sighed wearily. "Let's dance. We have to dance. That's what we came here for."

Rose took his arm forcefully. "I always did like enthusiastic drips," she said, towing him toward the dance floor.

It was Saturday and the place was jammed. The two orchestras ground it out, one after the other, never stopping. Harlem swing and Mexican rhumba. Don bought me ten hostess tickets and we danced.

"Glad I kept our date?" he asked.

"M-hm," I said and shut my eyes. I knew absolutely nothing about him, but there was something—a kind of melting rhythm. I hated to let go of him. For once I didn't mind the crowd that pressed against us as we pushed off the dance floor.

Behind us a young voice, high-pitched, hysterical with anger screamed: "Son of a—ungh!" The kid swung wildly at big Joe Burke, the cop. Joe lifted a deliberate paw, and held him off while floor men waded through the mob. Two of them twisted the kid's arms backwards. They trotted him through the crowd.

He kept sobbing: "Don't—oh don't—don't——" His face was white, his eyes slitted with rage and pain.

The orchestra played *This Must Be Heaven.*

I said, "You sure picked a nice comfortable spot to fall into, Rose!"

"What's the matter, honey?" asked Don. "You scared? Who is that little punk?"

"His name is Milo and he's dangerous. He carries a knife."

"How do you know?"

"I saw it. He started to get fresh with me tonight. I tried to shove him away and the next thing I knew he had a knife in his hand."

"What happened?"

"He said, 'Baby, don't try to push me around. I'm higher than a kite. You'll get your throat slit.' And then he laughed. He's drunk."

"Is he?" Don gave me a funny look, then he said, "Listen sugar, I've got to find Larry. Something I forgot to tell him. Watch your step and I'll see you later."

I STOOD there with nine unused tickets in my hand, feeling slightly let down. The crowd swirled and drifted around me.

"Listen, Babe." Amy slipped her arm through mine. "Do me a favor will you?"

"Yes, sure, Amy," I said. Most of the girls didn't like her. She was a racy little blonde with a seductive voice and taking ways. To date she had taken a mink coat, a diamond bracelet and all the best customers in the Paradise. Some of the girls called her the blonde Indian because she had big dark eyes and a permanent tan.

"I'm expecting Mr. Fox tonight," she went on confidentially. She didn't call him Foxy Grandpa like every one else did. "And I've got a date to meet some one on the back stairs. So if he comes in before I'm back on the stand, be a good kid and slip out and give me the high sign, will you, ducky?"

"But Amy," I objected. "Mike has fits if he catches any of the girls sneaking down the back stairs——"

"Oh, don't worry about that." Amy tossed her long blonde hair. "If he sees you, I'll fix it up."

She could, too. Even hardboiled Mike went for her in a big way. She broke all the rules and Mike just looked at her like a hungry dog.

"Well, all right," I agreed. "Only I hope he doesn't catch me."

She squeezed my arm and said, "Some night I want you to join one of my big parties. We'll go night-clubbing and you'll meet some swell guys."

"Oh, thanks, Amy," I said warily. I'd heard her parties were pretty wild and woolly. Still it might be fun to meet some of the big shots she was supposed to play around with.

I watched her slither through the crowd in her form-fitting red satin gown. She had a little trick of walking that made it swish and ripple from hips to ankles.

Larry and Rose came out of the crowd.

"Well, for crying out loud," she was shrilling. "If you're too weak to dance, give me the rest of the tickets. You bought 'em for me."

"Huh-uh," Larry mumbled, looking after Amy. "I might maybe meet a blonde."

"Don's looking for you," I told him.

"He's not looking very hard," Rose said. "He just passed us."

"Let's all go sit down and rest my feet," Larry suggested. He led us back to the hostess stand where Mike stopped him.

"No customers on the stand, please," he rasped.

Larry regarded him where he sat enthroned in the midst of fluttering feminine pulchritude. "Oh, I get it," he said finally. "How's about giving me a job here? Keeper of the Powder Puffs, or——"

"On your way, fellow, if you don't

want a partner."

"No, thanks, I just had one." Larry slouched away in the crowd.

I sat on the hostess stand again. They were talking about sex. I kept watching the crowd for a glimpse of Don and saying to myself, "Oops! Did you take a nose dive! So this is what it feels like to fall for somebody? Just like a toothache."

Mabel, the head hostess, was looking us over.

"Have any of you seen Amy?" she wanted to know. "One of her best pupils is here, and I can't locate her any place."

In the Paradise, a pupil was a sugar daddy who patronized the place regularly. Amy's "pupil" was Foxy Grandpa. He stood in an alcove and peeped out at the girls through thick glasses. He seemed to get some obscene pleasure out of his sly ogling.

I GOT up and strolled toward the back door. The crowd chattered and swarmed, surged on and off the dance floor in slow waves. The music bleated and pounded, wailed and sobbed.

I slipped through the back door and peeked over the railing. The Paradise was on the third and fourth floors. The second floor had offices and on the ground floor there were three or four shops and a bar, all opening into the hallway of the building. Somebody was always copping a sneak downstairs to the bar for a fast one and leaving the back door unlocked.

I saw Amy's red satin gown on the bottom landing. She was partly hidden by the man who faced her. They were arguing like mad and both talking at once. Before I could call, the man glanced quickly over his shoulder. It was the drummer in the Mexican band. His face was twisted with frenzy. Then he began shaking her viciously.

Like a fool I started down the stairs. I don't know what I meant to do, but I tried not to make any noise.

At the second floor I heard a soft scraping and bumping. The door to the stairway wobbled. Something made a noise like the last of the water going down a bathtub drain and a figure lurched through the door on hands and knees and sprawled at my feet, nearly tripping me.

It was Milo, the tough guy, who talked to girls with a knife in his hand. Only now there was a knife in his back, and bright red blood was oozing through his plaid jacket, blotting out the gaudy pattern. I stared at it stupidly.

There were stealthy steps on the stairs. Mike was glaring down at me. He came on silently, never taking his eyes off my face. He grabbed my arm and yanked me off my feet.

"You damn little fool!" he whispered hoarsely.

There was a shrill cry from below. I had forgotten Amy. Mike was staring intently over the railing, still gripping my arm with numbing force. He muttered a curse and turned back to me.

"Quick, get inside and not a sound out of you." He was lifting the limp figure easily, his hands at the waistline. The head flopped forward as it bent double, the knife sticking rigidly in the spreading red stain. Obediently I stepped through the door. The hall was dimly lighted by the red exit light. A janitor's closet was standing open. Mike deposited his burden inside, closed the door and had me by the arm again before I could think. He led me down the hall away from the stairway, turned a corner and faced me grimly in the shimmering reflection of Broadway signs.

"The only reason I'm helpin' you, you damn crazy fool, is to protect the Paradise," he growled through his teeth. "We can't have nothin' like this tied up to the ballroom so I'm givin' you a break—"

It didn't make sense. I looked back over my shoulder vaguely, trying to think—trying to make sense.

"Pay attention to me!" Mike shook me roughly and swore at me.

"Is he dead?"

"Damn right he's dead. You killed him, didn't you?"

"I—what? No. No!"

"Shut up and listen to me. I followed you down here. I knew that dirty little pickpocket was workin' with somebody in the Paradise. It was too slick, the way he got away with the stuff he snatched. And now I know who it was. You—you lousy little——" He shook me again. "I could get you for that alone. Now you done this. You ain't got a chance in a thousand to get away with it," he said slow and hard, "unless I help you."

"Mike, I don't know what you're talking about," I gasped. "Mike, I swear—I only came down the stairs to look for Amy. Mabel wants her. Foxy Grandpa——"

"That's right you——. Try to give Amy the rap for it. Why, I oughta let you burn and be damned to you. I oughta turn you in right now."

"Please listen to me!" I pleaded. "I don't know what happened. I don't know anything about it——"

"You think anybody's gonna believe that? Now you listen to me." He had both arms in his grip now. "I'm gonna take care of this, see? I gotta keep the Paradise clean. All you gotta do is keep your mouth shut. By God, if you so much as peep to anybody, you're good as in the death cell right now. Do you understand me?"

I FELT sick with a kind of sodden hopelessness. I could think of only one thing—to get away.

"You gonna do like I tell you?" Mike demanded gruffly. "You gonna go up in the ballroom and keep quiet?"

"Yes, I— Yes, of course."

"If anybody notices anything just tell 'em you don't feel good, see? I'll talk to you in my office later. We'll fix this all up and nobody won't know a thing about it—just you and me, you hear?"

"Yes, yes."

He led me back to the stairs. I stumbled along blindly. Mike opened the door a little way and peered out, then gave me a firm shove. I walked stiffly up the stairs, into the crowd that seemed somehow blurred and unreal. More stairs. People moving up and down, laughing and talking. Nothing made sense.

I was sitting at a dressing table looking in the mirror. I was scared sick. I could see myself in an iron cell, and how could I prove I didn't have anything to do with—a thing like that? Who would believe me?

Don! It hit me in the chest like a lead weight. What would he think? Would he care? And then I thought: *But I didn't do it. Somebody else did. Somebody else was there on the second floor. Maybe even while Mike and I . . .*

Mike had a lot of nerve accusing me. Amy was on the stairs with that Mexican drummer—fighting. It was her fault I was in this mess. Maybe she meant to get me into it. I began to get mad and my mind started working again. The more I thought, the madder I got and I meant to do something about it.

All right, I'd keep still until I talked

to Mike, and then I'd tell him.

"You don't have to worry about turning me over to the cops," I'd say. "Because I'm going to tell the cops myself. I'm going to tell them just what happened. I'm going to tell them . . ." My mind went on and it all seemed very reasonable, and simple.

Rose came in and spoke to the maid. then prowled inside and peeked under the doors of all the booths, inspecting the feet. She came out and put her hands on her curving hips, squinting angrily.

"What the hell's happened to Amy?" she wanted to know.

"That wench!" I said. "She's probably downstairs in the bar getting stiff."

"Not Amy. She don't drink." Rose tossed the pyramid of bright red pin curls. "Say, what are you sore about?"

"Nothing." I pressed the lipstick against my mouth to stop the quivering.

"Listen. I'm the one that's sore," Rose grumbled. "Mabel's got me stuck with Foxy Grandpa until Amy shows up, and Larry and Don want us to break away early and go places. I wish Foxy Grandpa would have a stroke or something."

"I thought he was Amy's best pupil," I said. "He ought to be good for a big tip."

"Don't give me hysterics," Rose sneered. "That old coot isn't handing out sugar for pleasant conversation. I'll be lucky if he buys me a dollar's worth of hostess tickets."

"Then how does Amy——"

"Amy's got angles you and I haven't found out about yet, baby." Rose ambled toward the door. "Come on, you won't find out about 'em sittin up here in No-Man's Land. Let's go to work."

I FOLLOWED her down the wide stairs to the mumbling, belching, whining, shuffling sounds of the ballroom.

"Look, Babe, you're not busy." Rose said. "You find Larry and Don and tell 'em I'm hung up with this four-eyed so-and so. If I can't get away, I'll arrange to meet you somewhere later."

I started to circulate through the crowd. It was slow going. I got stuck tight in the jam shoving off the dance floor between numbers. Somebody grabbed me from behind.

"Take it easy, baby." It was big Joe. Burke. For a minute my heart stopped. I thought I was pinched. "Come on, I'll get you out of this, but you gotta gimme a free dance."

A clarinet squealed, the drums went crazy, and wham—! the Mex crew was off.

Talk about hazardous occupations! Anybody that got through that dance without bruises must have had an alligator hide.

"What's this?" Joe was yelling in my ear. "What's this I hear about you goin' in for petty larceny?"

"Beat it out!" somebody yelled at the band. "Yay—break that thing!"

I let go of Joe's shoulder and started to fold up and cry right in the middle of that madhouse jamboree. Joe gave me a hefty squeeze.

"Take it easy," he told me. "I figgered Mike had you all wrong and I advised him to keep his big trap shut. or I'd give him a few lumps."

"Joe I—I have to tell you something," I gulped. "I didn't——"

"Don't worry. Soon as we get the goods on that little dip, we'll take him. And that'll be the last you'll ever hear of it."

"No, no, it's worse than you think. Mike thinks——"

A long, skinny damsel clutched at Joe

and passed out cold. She had to be toted away like a limp sack.

Joe eased me off the floor. The number was only half over.

"Listen, Joe," I gasped. "I've got to talk to you. You don't know what happened." The crowd pushed at us and I grabbed his arm. He grimaced.

"This ain't the time or place to talk, Babe. Don't you worry about a thing," he said, and plowed off through the crowd like he was tired.

I started after him and stopped. Maybe it would be better to talk to Mike first. Why had he told Joe I was helping that pickpocket? What if he had changed his mind. What if he was going to say I did that other thing. too. I clenched my hands, trying to stop the jitters.

Larry was draped over the railing that closed off the dance floor, watching me with his eyes half shut.

I told him Rose was stuck with a foul customer because Amy couldn't be found.

"So little Amy took a walk?" he remarked sleepily. "H'm-h' m-h'm, such is life in the dancehall racket. Well, come on. The b.f. is over here somewhere."

DON was sitting in a dim corner with Foxy Grandpa.

"Oh—oh," Pat said "Guess he's busy."

"Why, that's Amy's pupil," I said. "The one Rose is stuck with."

Don saw me staring at them. He got up and asked, "Looking for me, angelpuss?"

"I—I was just wondering where Rose is." I faltered. "She's supposed to be entertaining that old man you were talking to just now."

"She's sitting at a table back in the refreshment room," Don said. "He just left her for a minute to talk to me."

He smoothed his fingers down my arm. Something inside of me started doing flip-flops. It must have been my heart, and all the time I was thinking: *What has he got to do with a heel like Foxy?*

"Since my torment has gone and got herself hooked with a cash customer," Larry said idly, "she'll have to meet us elsewhere later. So why do we hang around any longer? How does it look?"

Don said: "No good. We may as well blow." He rumpled my hair. "Get your coat, Sugar, and we'll go downstairs to Tony's Bar and wait for the redhead."

I reached up to smooth my hair and Don caught my wrist. It was my left arm and there was a thin smear of blood from my wrist to the inside of my elbow. The blood was dry and I hadn't felt it before, but now it felt like a horrid crust.

Larry said, "That's what I thought."

"Did you hurt yourself?" Don asked.

"No!" I squeaked. "My arm was shivering all by itself. Don pulled me over to the drinking fountain and wet his handkerchief.

"Know where you got it?" he asked me. The water was ice-cold.

"She got it off that cop friend of hers," Larry said. "She and Joe Burke are just like this." He crossed his fingers and shook his head.

Don was patting my arm dry. It was all gooseflesh.

"I—I don't know where it came from," I chattered. But I was thinking: *Milo. It was Milo who had blood on him. Had I touched him after he . . .*

Don put his arm around my shoulders. "Stop your shivering and go get your coat," he told me. "I'm taking you out of here."

"I have to go to the office first," I said.

"Okay, then wait for me on that stand where the hostesses sit."

The office was locked. Nobody answered when I knocked. Mike was always in his office by this time, checking the early receipts from the cashiers. Why didn't he answer?

I stood there a minute and the shaking terror began to get me again. Somebody else had been on the second floor. Maybe they did that to Mike too.

"He is not back yet—no?" a soft voice inquired politely. It was the Mexican drummer.

I leaned against the door. "He's not coming back," I stammered. "He's——

"Oh, yes. I think so. I have spoken to him just a few minutes ago." He flashed his teeth in a nervous smile. "He has made an appointment with me. Very important."

"A few minutes ago?"

"Yes. Only just now. Fifteen—twenty minutes."

I straightened up and the horrors receded a little.

"Oh, thank you," I said. "Thank you very much."

He bowed. "It is nothing."

UP IN the ladies' room the long, skinny damsel who had passed out on the dance floor was just coming out of her faint, swearing like a cab driver. A grim, heavy woman with her hat on leaned over and slapped her.

I heard one of the girls whisper, "She takes it with the needle."

A dope fiend! So the grim woman must be a lady cop. I got away from there.

Mabel, the head hostess was already in line at the checkroom window. She sagged a little as if she'd had a tough night. She used to be a blonde Follies beauty, but now her hair was shiny black. I concentrated on the neat waves and curls and wondered what shade I'd dye my hair when I got that old.

Mabel said to the checkroom girl, "Look and see if Amy's things are still here." The girl came back and said, "Yes, she wore her mink. It's still here."

Mabel said: "I can't understand it."

I carried my coat downstairs and parked myself in a big chair. There were only a few girls left on the other side of the stand. I reached for my bag. It was wedged in behind the seat cushion. There was something else there, too. I pulled it out and sat there looking at it. Mabel came up and flung her coat down on a chair.

"You were smart to get your coat before the rush," she said. Her beautiful, tired eyes surveyed the ballroom.

"What on earth is that?" she demanded suddenly. She was looking at what I had in my hand.

It was a man's handkerchief all stuck together with dried blood. "I found it in this chair." I said, and dropped it with a shudder.

"Somebody must have had a nosebleed," Mabel said.

She pushed it under a chair with her toe. "The cleaners will sweep it up."

I rubbed my arm where the smear had been.

"Blood. Every place I go!" I choked. "Blood. I can't get away from it. I can't——"

"Here! Cut that out!" Mabel rapped at me. "Don't have hysterics over a dirty handkerchief."

If it was only a dirty handkerchief! I clenched my teeth. If Don would only come. I could talk to Mike tomorrow. I'd tell him I went to his office and he wasn't there. Maybe I should tell Don. He'd know what to do.

LARRY came past with his coat over his arm. He waved his hat at me.

"Haven't seen the boy friend, have you?"

"No," I said weakly. "Don't tell me he's lost too."

"Too?" Larry put one foot on the stand and rested on his knee. "Who else is missing?"

"I told you about Amy," I said. "And Mike and—and another fellow."

"What other fellow?"

I jumped up. "I forgot to tell Rose where to meet us."

"Here, here." Mabel stopped me. "It's against the rules to make dates with customers. You know that."

"Now wait a minute," Larry said. "This is not an assignation, and I'm not really a customer at all. I'm just here to see that Rose and Babe get home safe. No rule against that, is there?"

"Well——" Mabel began doubtfully.

"No, of course not," Larry went on. "But we can't go home because you've got Rose entertaining an old goat who hasn't sense enough to stay home in his wheel chair. So Babe and I have to go downstairs and sit in Tony's Bar and maybe we have a glass of beer while we're waiting. Surely you can't object to that. Not on moral grounds, anyway."

"Well," Mabel said again, getting cagey. "I might feel better about it if you had a chaperon, Babe's pretty young."

"That," declared Larry gallantly, "is what I was hoping for. So you'll join us."

I FOUND Rose sitting at a table in solitary dignity. She had her arms folded and a scowl on her face like Maggie waiting for Jiggs to come home.

"Didn't Foxy Grandpa come back yet?" I asked.

"I'm getting sick and tired of these damned disappearing acts," she gritted through her teeth. "He's been gone for half an hour and I can't leave the table till he pays the check. What the hell's going on around here anyway?"

"He must have found Amy," I said. "She's still here some place because her coat's upstairs."

"Isn't that just ducky?" Rose snorted. "So they leave me sitting here while Larry dates somebody else."

"He already did."

"Who?"

"Mabel." Rose looked shocked. "But only because she declared herself in." I explained hastily. "We're all going down to Tony's and wait for you."

"Oh, that's where Don was going."

"Where?"

"Tony's!" she snapped impatiently. "I saw him go through the back door a few minutes ago. I thought only the help knew how to use that exit."

A chill swept up from my ankles.

"What's the matter with you anyway? You look like a sick cat," Rose said crossly.

"It's just—I don't feel very good. I think it's appendicitis or laryngitis or something." I walked away.

My throat felt dry and hot. I stopped at the soda fountain for a drink of water. The two boys behind the counter were arguing.

"Never had it, I tell you! I seen it when I come on duty and I ain't saw it since."

"Well, it ain't here and it couldn't of flew out the window. Somebody must of took it."

"What would anybody want with a giant ice pick?"

"How do I know? To pick their teeth with, I s'pose."

Mabel was putting on her coat when I got back to the stand. "Your friend Larry said we should go on down to the bar while he collects his partner."

"Where did he go?" I asked vaguely.

"Who?"

"I don't know," I said. "Everything's getting all mixed up. I suppose we'll disappear next."

"You look all in," Mabel informed me. "You'll feel better when we get outside." I'd feel better if I could see Don. No matter where it was. I wished Mabel would hurry.

We joined the early mob inching down the red-carpeted stairs. Out on Broadway, Mabel said, "I don't want to be seen going into a bar. Somebody in this gang will be sure to tell the boss I'm a souse. We'll walk around the corner and go in the side door of the building."

I couldn't see that it made any difference how she got there, once she was inside where people would see her anyway, but I followed her around the corner. The side entrance was locked.

"Oh, fudge!" Mabel said.

"There's a door in the alley," I told her. "Maybe we can get in that way."

The alley was dim and the paving had holes in it. "Just a couple of old alley rats," Mabel muttered, and nearly broke a leg stepping into a cavity as I hurried her along.

WE TUGGED at the heavy metal door and collapsed upon each other when it finally swung open with a sound like a grunt. Inside, the only light was a weak bulb in a little wire cage. A long ramp extended downward.

I started down and Mabel said, "Do you by any chance know where you're going?"

"Oh sure," I said. "I came in this way once before. Just follow me."

From the bottom of the ramp we could barely see the pale caged light.

"I think I prefer the front entrance," Mabel decided, "regardless of public opinion. I'm going out of here."

"No wait," I said. "There's a door —let me see. Right over h——"

I pitched off into black emptiness. Mabel yelped behind me and I landed with a splashing sound in a sea of paper. I lay there half buried.

"God save us and help us!" Mabel was moaning. "Are you dead? Answer me, damn you!"

"Yes," I said. "I mean no, I'm all right, I guess." I sat up and sneezed.

"Argnh!" Mabel snarled. "'Just follow me,' says you, diving off into space." She was fumbling and scratching around in her bag and all at once she struck a wavering match.

I was down in a pit partly filled with heaps of waste paper. Some of it was stacked in bales at one side. Mabel crouched in an opening several feet above me. Then the match went out.

She struck another, and I said, "For heaven's sake! Don't sit up there lighting matches over all this paper! I'll be burned alive."

"It's a cinch you can't get back up here," Mabel declared acidly. "And I can't just go away and leave you there, so . . ."

The next minute she was floundering and rattling in the paper beside me.

"I just happened to remember," I told her. "The door we wanted is right near the top of that ramp. We came a little too far."

"You're telling me!" She ground the words out. "Well, get up, you halfwit. There's a door at each end of this——"

"I lost my good bag," I said.

"You would!" growled Mabel, trying to stand up. She shuffled a little way and something went *ping*.

"Well, there's a light hanging down here," she said. "It hit me in the eye. Stay right there while I go and find the switch. It must be near one of these doors."

She went swishing through paper drifts. "Believe it or not," she declared bitterly. "I came in here for a drink."

Pretty soon I could hear her fumbling up and down the rough wall. The blessed light clicked on, and I started to look for my rhinestone bag.

Mabel said, "Glug—" and I turned around to look at her. She had stiffened in the middle of taking a step. Her face was twisted like she was trying to sneeze.

I said: *"Gesundheit!"*

"Oo-ooh," Mabel shuddered. "Here's Amy . . ."

I sat there and looked at Mabel, trying to figure out what she was talking about while her face returned to normal.

"Come here!" she said sharply, and I jumped up and waded to her side.

AMY was lying face down, partly covered with a pile of paper. Her red satin gown was pulled up to her bare tan thighs, and one gold sandal was turned awkwardly sideways. The yellow hair drooped forward and underneath it was black.

Mabel was pulling at my fingers, and I realized that I had clutched her arm with all my strength.

"Oh God. What happened?" Mabel groaned.

"She's dead too," I said stupidly. A tall trash can was dumped on its side with bloody towels spilling out. Some one must have carried Amy down in that.

Mabel took two shaky steps, leaned over stiffly and touched Amy's rear.

"Amy?" she inquired tentatively. In the hollow stillness the sound of her voice seemed to keep repeating itself foolishly: "Amy? Amy? Amy?" until it died away in whispers.

Mabel grasped one whitened shoulder and hauled at the body. Amy's face had a horrible gawping expression. The scarlet breast of her gown was clotted with damp, dark blood. A long green-handled ice pick hung jauntily from her belt. Mabel let her sink back into the paper heap wtih a stiff crackling.

"Let's get out of here," she said hoarsely.

All at once the thing hit me. I started gagging and gasping. I didn't know whether I was going to cry or be sick. Mabel got me by the nape of the neck. Her hands shook me back and forth and her fingers kneaded the muscles at the top of my shoulders. Nerves tingled all the way down my spine and up the back of my skull.

"Oh." I said.

"No need to get hysterical," Mabel declared coolly, drawing me away from Amy. "All we have to do is go upstairs and tell 'em that——"

There was a swift rustling in the paper. I grabbed Mabel and she snapped: "Now cut it out! That's only a little mouse." A long dun-colored rat scooted over the paper. "Or a little rat," Mabel amended.

"Listen, Mabel," I whispered shakily. "Somebody in this building is killing people."

"Obviously!" Mabel snapped. "Come on. We're getting out—I hope."

Her sharp voice steadied me a little. "No, wait," I caught her arm. "There was another one. Milo—that fellow that started a fight with Joe Burke on the dance floor——"

"I know who you mean. What about him?"

So I told her. The words tumbled out all mixed up, but at last I was ridding myself of the choked-down terror. She looked at me with a fixed blank look when I had finished.

She said, "I knew Mike was short

on brains, but I never dreamed he was that much of a damn fool."

"You don't think I had anything to do with it?"

"Of course not! We're going out of here and grab the first cop we see. Mike or no Mike."

Mabel chose the nearest door and left it open behind us. My legs were shaking and I kept a tight hold on Mabel's coat. We went groping down a narrow passage. The end of it opened on a flight of stairs. But, at the top, the entrance to the first floor was blocked by an iron fire door.

"What wise guy did that?" Mabel muttered indignantly. "This door isn't supposed to be shut until two o'clock."

"Pound it," I gasped. "Kick it!"

"No good," Mabel declared. "That thing locks automatically when it's shut and can't be opened until the building superintendent gets here in the morning." We stared at it helplessly.

"Well, here we go," Mabel said firmly and started for the next flight of stairs.

I dragged at her coat. "No, Mabel, not up there! Don't go up there!"

"Don't be a fool," she said sharply. "Whoever it was has gone long ago. There couldn't possibly be any danger now." She went on up the stairs.

I watched her, my knees shaking and then with a rush I went after her.

FOR some reason we went up the steps on tiptoe. I kept seeing Amy, all crumpled and bloody, with her black hair showing under the blonde. The lights were little spaced glimmers on each landing. The music from the Paradise sounded faint and far away.

At the second floor all the lights blinked out.

Mabel said nervously, "This is no time for a black-out."

We waited for the lights to come on again. After long seconds, Mabel moved, started feeling for the stairs in the dark.

Noise broke loose somewhere on the second floor. Running feet and guns. *Boom—crack-crack—boom—crack!*

Mabel jerked me back so hard my head thumped the wall in the corner of the landing. Something heavy came smashing through the door, breathed hoarsely for one heart-strangling instant, and then went stumbling up the stairs.

We were frozen still for a long, long time. I was leaning partly on Mabel and partly against the wall. My nerves felt like somebody had stretched them taut. They ached.

Thin and faint we heard a siren. It sounded so far away it made everything worse. Being trapped like this, practically in the middle of Broadway. Surely somebody had heard the shots.

The lights flicked on. Still we didn't budge. We were staring at the door. It moved, stopped, and moved again. Mabel let go of me and took a deep breath like she was going to cut loose with both lungs.

Larry's head came around the door. He said, "Aw, for God's sake!" and hung there, twisted like an angry snake.

A voice behind the door said: "What?"

Larry slowly uncoiled himself and disappeared.

"Look what's out there!" he said with heavy disgust.

Don stepped out and took one look at me. "Get in here!" he ordered curtly. He was waving a gun. We went.

"How long were you out there?" Larry demanded.

I shook my head numbly. This

nightmare has gone far enough, I was thinking, I wish I'd wake up.

"Who else was out there?" Don asked anxiously.

Mabel answered him in a cold, harsh voice. "We didn't see anything at all. The lights went out, you started shooting, and somebody came out on the landing and went up the stairs. That's all we can tell you. Now I'm going to call the——"

"We'll take care of the police," Larry said.

They escorted us down the hall to a door marked Ladies.

"You'll stay out of trouble in here," Don said. "If you keep quiet." He unlocked the door.

The place was a solid fog of cigaret smoke. Rose was sitting on the wash bowl. "It's about time!" she yelled, and then got a look at Mabel and me as we came in. "My God! What's happened to you?"

I guess we looked pretty haggard and mussed up.

The door closed and a key turned. Rose hopped off the wash bowl. "Larry!" she screamed. "What's the idea? What's going on? Let me out!"

Larry's voice came from the other side of the door. It sounded lower than the bottom of the bass fiddle. "Rosey, if you want to keep on living —undamaged—you'll be absolutely quiet, no matter what happens. You hear?"

Rose looked at the door from top to bottom, then she said tensely: "Okay, I got you."

Her green eyes were popping. "What was all that shooting?" she demanded.

"This is terrible!" Mabel said. She gazed around the small white-tiled room hopelessly. The only opening was a grated ventilator near the ceiling.

SOMETHING queer had happened to me. Rose and Mabel seemed to be moving in slow motion. Their voices came from a long way off. I thought: *Of course, this* must *be one of those nightmares. Pretty soon we'll all go falling through space.*

"Amy butchered!" Rose was hissing. "My God! What'll they do to us?"

"If they intended to kill us they could have done it by this time," Mabel told her. "I don't think they're coming back."

"I hope not!" Rose breathed. "But who'd ever think I'd be glad to spend the night in a can." She climbed back on the washbowl and swung her legs nervously.

Mabel turned a waste basket upside down and sat on it.

"How did you get up here, anyway?" she asked Rose.

"I came up the back stairs looking for you," Rose snorted. "When I couldn't find you in Tony's, I thought you were still in the Paradise. I met Larry on the stairs. He was sore as hell and chucked me in here. I never dreamed those two fellows would do a thing like this. Why would they want to kill Amy?"

"They didn't!" I gasped.

"Then who the hell did?" Rose spat at me. "I hope you don't think it was me."

"It was the drummer," I said. "In the Mexican band."

"Why not make it the oboe player?" Rose cracked. "I never did like him."

"But I *saw* him," I insisted, "fighting with Amy down at the bottom of the back stairs. And then Milo fell out——"

"What would Amy be fighting with him for?" Rose demanded.

"She wouldn't know," Mabel said. "I wonder what Milo was doing down on the second floor."

"He was drunk," I said. "He told me he was higher than a kite."

"He was a snowbird," Mabel said thoughtfully. "He must have been high on coke, not liquor. Wait a minute!" She sat up and snapped her fingers. "The kid always came in the Paradise looking like something out of the morgue with the jitters, and before he left he was walking around on pink clouds. Do you suppose he got it in the Paradise?"

"Why not?" Rose asked. "Amy knew how to get all kinds of junk. I'm pretty sure she was on the stuff herself because I heard her telling about a party once where they all drank champagne after a sleigh ride and nearly died. She was always trying to get the girls to smoke muggles—you know, marijuana, just for the hell of it."

"That's what this mess is all about," Mabel rasped. "Dope! That's what all those people were doing out on the back stairs. They must keep it here on the second floor. Catch on?"

"Boy!" Rose clicked her tongue. "What a swell set-up. Just drop in at the Paradise and place your order. And you wanta know something else?" She leaned forward and stretched tense fingers toward us. "Foxy Grandpa must be in on it. He was fussing like an old hen because he couldn't locate Amy tonight. And then *he* disappeared and never came back."

MABEL'S eyes went blank with terror. She was watching the door. The handle turned slowly all the way to the left and then back to the right. Rose gulped and poised on the edge of the wash bowl.

"Who's in there?" It was Mike.

Rose shrieked: "Let us out!"

"It's Mabel, Mike. We're locked in!"

"Bust the door in!" Rose pounded it with her fists.

There was a loud crashing and splintering. Mike kicked a large hole in the door. We crawled through the jagged opening.

"Are they gone?" Rose squealed.

"What's goin' on?" Mike demanded.

"G-get us out of here quick!" Mabel stuttered. "They'll kill us all!"

I followed them down the hall. There was a cold lump inside of me. I thought: *Maybe Don meant to come back. Maybe there was some reason . . .*

A small feather of blue smoke curled around the corner of the hall and felt its way along the floor. I wondered what it was doing there.

The back stairs were silent, deserted. As if nothing had been going on there all evening. The paradise was all dark except for two or three remote blue lights. It looked like acres of ghostly space.

"The most terrible thing!" Mabel was chattering. "They've killed Amy and—and——"

Mike sagged against the wall and pushed one hand through his hair. He acted as if somebody had just hit him a terrific punch. "Huh?" he asked stupidly.

"Amy! She's dead, Mike. We found her down in the basement. And they killed that pickpocket too."

Mike said, "Aw——" and sat down slowly.

"Oh, for crying out—— Move!" Rose choked. "Call the cops. Mike! Get up!"

"Yeah," Mike said painfully. He heaved himself up like a tired elephant. "The cops," he muttered. "I got-ta . . ."

Rose and I followed Mabel into the office. She snapped on the light and started panting, "Oh—oh—oh——"

And then she went all to pieces.

I don't know what Rose was doing. I saw the Mexican drummer doubled up on the floor. His head was dark crimson instead of black.

Mike leaned in the door and goggled at us foolishly.

Rose made a dry gasping sound and backed around the desk toward the phone.

Mike croaked, "Leave that alone!" He lunged into the room. His paws were shaking, fumbling at the pocket of his tux. The pocket ripped, his hand came away with a gun.

"You dames done this, see? You killed Amy and those guys. And I caught you—I caught you——"

"Are you crazy?" Rose yelped.

"What——" Mabel flung herself around, still shuddering.

"No, we didn't!" My teeth were chattering. "Honest, Mike. Listen, it was somebody else. Somebody stole that ice pick from behind the soda fountain and stabbed Amy. You know we can't go behind the soda fountain. You know we——"

"Mike! For God's sakes, you're drunk!" Rose yelled. "Snap out of it and put that gun——"

"I'm gonna tell 'em you dames done it," Mike croaked.

"Somebody else," I gasped. "Before we even left the Paradise—they killed Amy—and they hid a man's bloody handkerchief on the hostess stand——"

MABEL howled like a banshee and pointed both hands at Mike. "You're the only man allowed on the hostess stand! You can go behind the soda fountain! You could call a musician into the office. You did this. You killed Amy——"

"Yeah." Mike licked his lips like an animal. "I killed Amy. I gave her everything she wanted. I let her use the Paradise to peddle dope for Foxy." His voice was dull and flat. "Because she wanted dough, she wanted diamonds. She wanted—all the time she wanted things. And I done everything she asked. I killed Milo for her. She said he was puttin' the squeeze on her for more dope. Blackmailin' her with letters he stole. He wouldn't give me the letters. So I killed him and threw him in the closet. But he didn't die right away, and you saw him." He turned glazed eyes on me.

I was hypnotized, with all feeling suspended. In the dead stillness the toneless voice droned on.

"So then I finished him, and when I came out on the stairs, Amy was there and I told her and she laughed at me. She laughed and said she was through with me because she was goin' to Mexico with her husband—him." Mike looked blankly at the dead Mexican. "I never knew she was married to anyone."

Mabel moved convulsively and his head snapped up as he lifted the gun. "I killed 'em," he said wearily. "And now I gotta kill you. You ain't never gonna tell anybody—"

Suddenly Mabel was screaming with lunatic frenzy. Mike stood in front of her with his shoulders hunched and his head moving back and forth like a gorilla. He smashed her in the face. She straightened up and went over backwards.

Rose leaped for the fuse box near the door. Everything turned black. "Run, Babe, run!" she screamed. A roaring red streak split the room. Something crashed.

I was running in the dark. Thunder claps echoed all the way around the ballroom. I squeezed behind a heavy divan. Light flared and died, and flared again. A blaze of it moved from one end of the ballroom to the other.

It had pounding feet, touched things, left them burning. It came toward me.

I squirmed, felt the sharp rasp of an arm scraped raw. Then I was up, stumbling through the smoky shadows with the running fire after me. I crashed into a chair, sprawled and scrambled up ahead of the blazing torch that came flying through the air. The gun roared again.

There was just one thing—to get back to the second floor. I wrenched at the door, felt my feet hitting and missing the stairs, all out of control. I skittered down the last few steps, landed on my knees against the door, dragged at the handle. Thick, stifling smoke came billowing down the hall. Fire here too. Maybe Don was in there . . .

Feet thumping on the stairs outside the door. I ran. Straight into the smoke. The fire was in one of the offices. The door was locked. Smoke poured out all around the frame. I beat on the door in numb, helpless terror.

"Don—Don—Don——"

A crazy echo answered: "Coming, angel!"

Hands were dragging at me. "Here, hang onto her." I struggled. The door crashed in.

"Take it easy, baby." It sounded like Joe Burke. This was delirium. I could see flames—small vicious ones, licking at walls and floor.

Don's voice calling: "Larry! Larry!"

I tried to scream, to fight loose. But Don came through the door. He was dragging something else—Larry, with his eyes closed. More feet pounding through the smoke, yelling and beating at the flames . . .

I SAT in a dentist chair. Sirens smeared the night with wailing sound. Joe Burke was there with his arm in a sling. Two men in white were down on the floor with Larry.

"Fracture?" the fat one asked.

"Just a concussion," the sad, dark one said. "The burns are the worst, but whoever cracked him on the head wasn't fooling." He looked at the gold badge on Larry's vest. "Internal Revenue," he said. "What were they after—dope?"

"Yup," said Joe. "I give 'em the tip about Foxy Grandpa, but we never expected no action tonight. We was a little short-handed. That's how come this guy got conked."

My eyes burned and my throat was raw, but my heart was doing nip-ups.

Larry said: "Grawf——"

The fat intern held a roll of gauze while the somber one wrapped a turban around Larry's head. "They get the old guy?"

"Oh sure, that was the least of our worries," Joe said. "This Milo, one of the kids in the mob, gets knocked off. The old Fox claims he ain't guilty; but whether he done it or not, he gets panicky and slips down to the office on this floor where he keeps the dope, hopin' to clean it out and make a get-away. These Revenue guys nab him in the act. And then they find the kid with a knife jabbed in his back."

"How did this guy come to get biffed?"

"He's alone on the back stairs while his partner's outside placin' reinforcements around the building, and I'm watchin' the front entrance. We know some of Foxy's mob are still in the Paradise, includin' Mike Stiegel, the manager of the joint——"

"D'ja gettim?" Larry croaked.

"We got him!" Joe said. "He's sittin' down in the Tombs with a bashed head."

"He's 'n ape," Larry mouthed thick-

ly. "Came down—second time—through a window—— Ugh——"

"Quiet," said the fat intern.

A uniformed cop stuck his head in the door. "No soap, Joe," he said. "That blond witch musta lammed in a hurry and forgot her mink benny. There ain't a sign of anybody upstairs."

I opened my eyes. "She's down in the basement with an ice pick," I mumbled.

"Take it easy, baby." Joe patted my head. "You'll feel all right in a little while. This ain't no time to talk."

"That's what you said before when I started to tell you about Milo getting k-killed," I said. "Mabel and I fell into a room full of paper and Amy was there."

"You don't know what you're talkin' about, Babe," Joe told me soothingly. "You're still a little light-headed. You never said nothin' to me about Milo."

"You wouldn't let me," I said indignantly. "It was when you danced with me tonight. You just walked away."

Joe looked at me sharply. "That was because that dame that passed out had just pushed a knife through my flipper, kid. Her and Milo both tried to get me tonight in the crowd. Did you really see Milo after he——"

"Yes, I did. Right out on the second floor landing. He slid through the door at me. I practically fell over him."

"And Amy?"

"She—she's dead too. Mike did it. With an ice pick in the basement."

Joe turned to the uniformed cop. "Better go down and have a look, Cassidy," he said.

"Now let's see if you can give me a halfway straight story," Joe said to me. "Try and begin at the beginning."

I STARTED with Milo and told him. How Mike said I did it, and about the bloody handkerchief and the missing ice pick and everybody disappearing. It was the first time I ever saw Joe Burke excited.

The interns took turns hissing, "Quiet!" But Joe kept forgetting.

When I got to the part about the dead Mexican drummer, he let out a bellow like six mad bears. The medics chased us out into the hall. The bitter stench of cold smoke poisoned the air.

Joe clamped his fingers around my arm. "Listen, baby," he muttered. "Before we go any further, are there any other stiffs you stumbled over around here that you ain't told me about yet?"

"Why no," I said. "I don't think so."

"Because you coulda saved an awful lot of time and trouble if you'd told somebody—*anybody*—about the first one as soon as you fell over him."

"I was scared because Mike said I'd go to the death cell if I talked!" I cried. "But when you said he was acusing me of helping that dead pickpocket I thought I better tell you. Only you wouldn't listen."

The uniformed cop came galloping down the hall. "Joe, I found her," he yelled. "That guy musta done away with the other two dames, too."

"What other——" I gasped, and grabbed Joe's coat. "Mabel and Rose! Joe, where are they?"

"Take it easy, baby. They musta got out in all the excitement and run for home. There ain't no trace of 'em anywhere."

I turned and ran toward the stairs with Joe after me, yelling.

The Paradise was a mess. The burned upholstery smelled like rotten turnips. Firemen and cops were all over the place. Mike's office was empty, but there were dark spots on the carpet. Three plainclothes cops stood outside the door and argued about it.

"He musta knocked one of 'em off here. You can't get around that."

"All right, you show me a body, and I'll buy you a ten-cent cigar."

"Did you search the alley behind this joint? Maybe he tossed 'em both out the window."

"It wasn't no dame he killed up here," Joe informed them. "It was a Mexican guy outa the band. This little chick saw him."

They started shooting questions at me and I got all mixed up.

Joe said, "Lay off. The kid's had a tough night. She saw the corpse all right. And there's another one in the cellar Cassidy just found, so this Mexican stiff must be around here somewhere. Let's take another look."

DON came across the wet dance floor and turned me around to look me over. His eyes were sharp and hard. "You feel all right?" he asked.

That was all I needed. I caved in under Don's chin and started to wail. He wasn't a bit gentle. His arms were hard as iron. But stern as he was, and bad as I felt, I still got that singing rhythm when I was close to him.

"Go upstairs and sit down," he snapped at me.

I wandered up to the ladies' room. Everything was turned upside down. I wanted to cry some more, but I was too tired. A bleary-eyed witch was making faces in a long mirror. Me! Was I a fright!

I hobbled inside to wash my face and heard this muffled yowling coming up through the wall. I was petrified for a minute. Then I stumbled out and started yelling. Joe Burke came tearing up the stairs.

It was in the laundry chute. The metal cover was locked. Two more cops loped in. Joe braced his foot on the wall, gripped the cover with his good hand and ripped it off. The hollow howls coming up increased like an amplifier with hysterics.

"Take it easy!" Joe yelled down. "We'll fish you out in just a second!"

One of the cops disappeared on the run.

"I'll be damned!" Joe shoved his hat back. "The son-of-a-gun musta stuffed 'em in the chute from the men's room downstairs."

A skinny fireman took off most of his clothes and went up from the bottom to haul them out. The Mexican drummer with part of his head shot off was mixed in with the dirty towels under the chute.

Mabel's jaw looked like the mumps turned blue, and Rose had a large bulb on the side of her head. They were stretched out on a couple of divans in the ladies' room. The two men in white were giving them first aid when Joe Burke came in.

"Let this be a lesson to you," he said. "Next time you dames see cops at work, you wanta keep on goin'—the other way. The only reason you ain't all three stiff by now is because this lug run out of ammunition and cutlery."

Rose peered out from behind the long red corkscrews dangling over her face. "Of all the crust!" she yipped. "We didn't even know these guys were G-men. They make a date with us and then start a war. What the hell do they think we are—psychics?"

"Take it easy, Red," Joe Burke said. "They didn't know the blow-off was comin' tonight. All they intended was to get in with a couple of you girls and hang around the Paradise until they got enough evidence. At that," he added, "it wouldn't have been so rough if Mike hadn't gone haywire and bawled everything up."

Mabel spoke stiffly out of the side of

her face. "All I was after," she mumbled, "was a small glass of beer."

Don stepped in and took a look at Mabel and Rose. "How are they?" he asked. "Going to be all right?"

"Good as new with a little patching," the fat intern said.

Don gave me a brief glance and said to Joe! "Looks like we've got all the answers now. That dead musician was Amy's husband, all right. She was Mexican too."

"I knew it!" Rose squeaked. "That hair——"

"Quiet!" the intern said.

Don came over and lifted me to my feet. "Your face is dirty," he remarked.

My heart jiggled over to the wrong side, but I didn't pay any attention to it.

"Awfully sorry," I said haughtily. "I'm never at my best after murders and fires. I do hope we haven't interfered too much with your work."

"Hey! What is this?"

"Why, I guess we girls have served our purpose," I murmured. "You were just using us to get the evidence you wanted—and you got it, so——"

"Somebody's been putting ideas into your head, angel-puss, and it doesn't agree with you. You're still my heart, and you know it."

Joe Burke, the big droop, said, "Don't let Babe kid you. She goes for the Revenue Department in a big way. Look at how she's hangin' onto you."

I could have murdered him!

THE END

» » CRIME ODDITIES « «

THE various shapes crime takes seem endless, as evidenced by this relatively unfamiliar method used by criminals to line their pockets with green dollar bills. We're speaking of the recent arrest in Chicago of a man who was seized and brought into court when he was discovered while attempting to remove a ring from the body during the course of a wake.

From his confession, it was revealed that the individual in question had been earning a livelihood for some time in the practice of removing items of value from corpses and selling them to the traditional highest bidder. To bear this out, fifteen other death notices were found in his pocket, which he had fully intended to make good use of before the close of the day.

* * *

IT SEEMS that it is possible to carry the prevention of crime and the apprehension of criminals too far. Unique as such a statement might appear to be, it proved its rationality in the recent action taken by Judge Baker of the Superior Court in Michigan City, Indiana, when he declared it illegal for O.P.A. investigators and state police highway blockades to stop cars in search of hidden whiskey.

As the story goes, police officials were deluged with complaints by tourists who were indignant at the delay caused by the overly diligent examiners who were merely trying to perform their duty by preventing the transportation of whiskey through Indiana into liquor-rationed Michigan. Judge Baker's declaration found disfavor with the state excise department, but he was adamant, stating that the Indiana Supreme Court as well as the United States Supreme Court have said that it would be an intolerable and unreasonable practice for any authorized agent to stop every automobile on the possibility of discovering hidden liquor. Judge Baker asserted that all persons legally within the country have the right to use the public highways without interruption or search and that no local or federal officer is entitled to stop a motorist to determine whether he is conducting himself in a lawful manner, unless he has good reason to do so. He further admitted that the law also included blockades set up for the capture of bank bandits.

* * *

LIKE taking candy from a baby is the currently predominant crime of stealing allotment checks from mailboxes. Not only is the practice of depriving families of this well-deserved and often desperately needed income relatively as simple, but equally as unscrupulous.

The method used by these most noble criminals who are getting rich at the expense of our fighting men's dependents is to make the rounds of the mailboxes during the early part of the month—pay day—and by ingenious methods, pry them open and extract the brown envelopes which might mean anything to the civilians at home from a square meal to another war bond. While the various checks may not amount to much money individually, just imagine what proportions they

could assume collectively after a day's "haul."

The source of the criminal's information as to which mailboxes contain the coveted "not to be folded" green slips is difficult to accurately determine, but by a stretch of the imagination, one could hit upon several recourses open to him. Diligent surveillance of the daily meanderings of the mailman could produce the desired results. Or, on the other hand, intimate acquaintance with the people comprising the neighborhood would be of valuable assistance to the criminal. In any event, it is of utmost importance that the increasing menace be curbed to the greatest possible degree and concerted action is being taken in this direction by post office officials and government authorities alike.

Currency exchange employees are being instructed to utilize more comprehensive methods of identifying customers in order to dispense with the heretofore comparative ease in cashing checks. In rural communities, postmen are expending every effort to deliver these checks personally into the hands of the proper recipients. It is not impossible to accomplish this in small towns, since in the majority of cases, the mailman is usually familiar with the various members of the families and the circumstances surrounding each. In large cities, of course, the problem is more difficult, and probably the most successful solution lies in the interest displayed by the individual residents. It would seem that if each dependent would keep a sharp eye on his mailbox until the check is received, he could do much in decreasing the income of the interested criminal.

* * *

IT LOOKS like a comfortable era for many of Germany's more spirited and inspired criminals. It seems that Germany is so taken up with the all-important task of holding its own against its opponents in the present war that the civilians at home have been forbidden by Gestapo Chief Heinrich Himmler to seek the aid of the police or the courts in cases of petty thefts or other minor complaints. Himmler feels that "the police have no time to bother with such matters in war time."

* * *

INVESTIGATION of war crimes on an international basis is being inaugurated by the establishment of a United Nations commission for this purpose. Final arrangements were recently completed at a meeting in London, at which the Lord Chancellor presided and representatives of the following governments were present: the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the United States, the French Committee of National Liberation, Yugoslavia, Netherlands, Norway, New Zealand, the Union of South Africa, Poland, Luxembourg, Greece, India, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Canada, Australia, China and Belgium.

THE flying of kites by Dutch children has been made a crime punishable with prison sentences and fines for their elders under a new decree of Police General Walter Rauter, German Commissioner-General for Public Safety.

Kite-flying, an age-old favorite sport of Hollanders, was forbidden last May by German occupation authorities. According to De Tijd, German-controlled Amsterdam daily, parents, educators and others entrusted with supervision of minors can be sentenced to as much as six months in prison or fined up to 300 guilders ($160) if, by "suitable" supervision, they could have prevented such "punishable behavior" as kite-flying by a minor.

* * *

SCIENCE scores a new triumph against the ravages of crime—this time in the shape of television. The police department of New York City recently transmitted pictures of missing criminals to eighty-five television sets located in police stations of the surrounding five burroughs. It is too early yet to know how effective this new system will prove to be in capturing wily criminals—but history in police annals is being made as of now!

* * *

A POLICEMAN'S dream came true recently in Chicago when two thiefs, after stealing a car and robbing several people, conveniently crashed into a telephone pole right behind a police station. If only all criminals were so considerate, think how uncomplicated would be the lives of those dealing out justice.

* * *

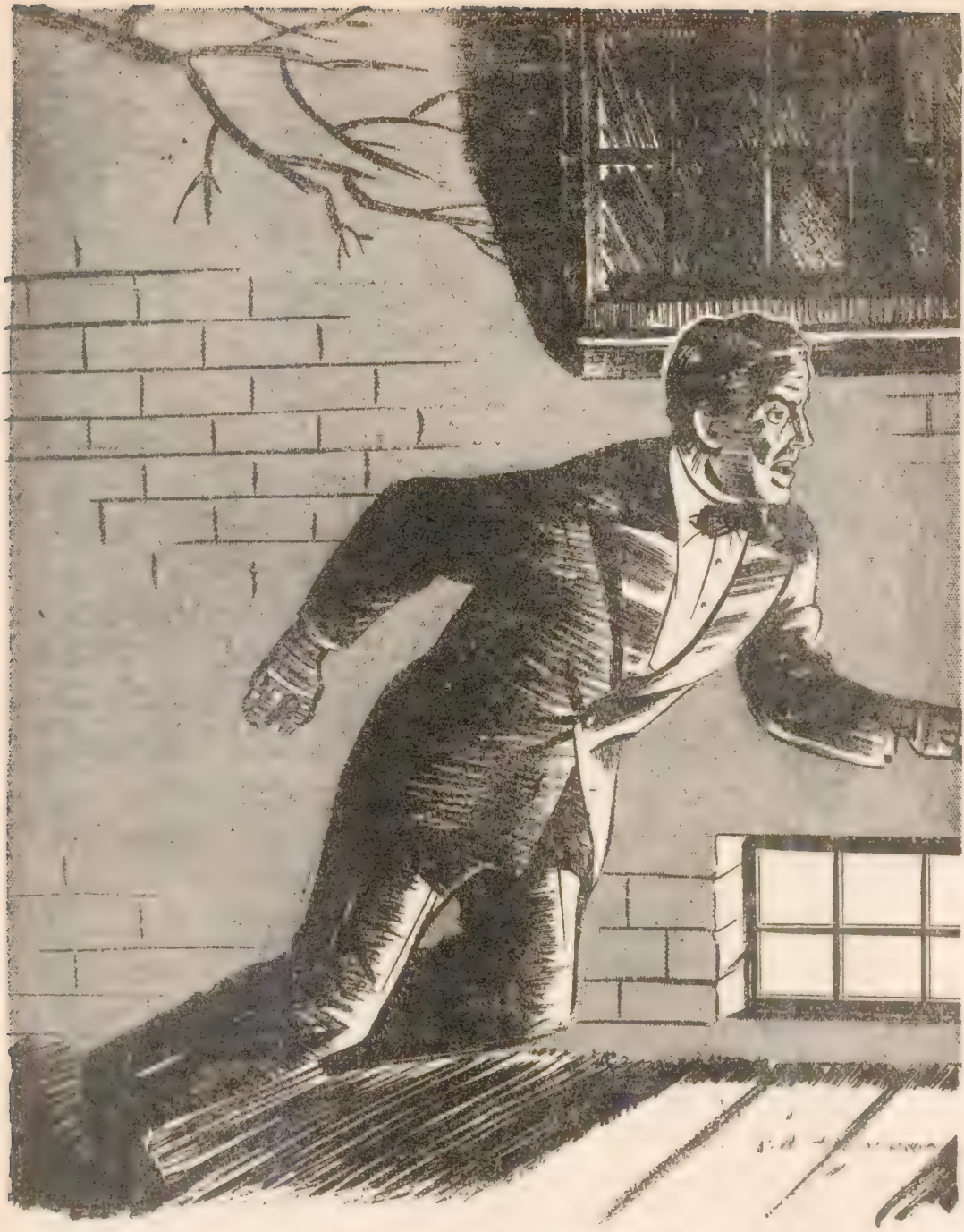
TWO burglars who seemingly work for the love and exercise of it, performed a beautiful and back-breaking job of removing a one-ton safe from a cafe for the purpose of cracking it at their leisure. A very tidy thought, but without much reward in this case, for the safe was empty. If only someone could have tapped them on the shoulder and told them to look in the cash-register which was jammed to the top with money and was unlocked as well!

* * *

IN WISCONSIN recently, a defendant was allowed to go scot free for stealing gasoline ration stamps because the larceny charge against him could not be sustained. It seems that since the coupons have no monetary value, their theft cannot be construed as larceny according to the Wisconsin laws. The only charge that could possibly be brought against him in such a case would be disorderly conduct. For the sake of the Wisconsin automobile-drivers, do we hear any other suggestions?

* * *

A SERIOUS wartime penalty was imposed upon two eleven-year-old girls brought into a London court on charges of stealing a purse for the purpose of buying candy to satisfy their collective sweet-teeth. Their sweets ration was denied them for one month.



BY WILLIAM BRENGLE

CRASH!

Both Miss Richards at the switchboard and Lafayette Muldoon behind a newspaper at his desk raised startled eyes as the street door of the Griswold Realty Company banged shut with glass-quivering force.

"Where do I find the boss around here?" growled a rage-thickened voice.

Miss Richards' sallow cheeks paled perceptibly as she shrank back in her chair before the ominous advance of a

Maybe murder should happen to a practical joker—but why bring in the whole family?

thick-set paunchy middle-aged man in a wrinkled suit of gray seersucker. She said nervously:

"W-w-won't you sit down for a moment, sir? I'll notify Mr. Griswold that you wish to see him. If you'll just give me your name . . ."

The man was looming over her now, his beady blue eyes glaring. He snarled, "To hell with that stuff! You tell Griswold——"

A lean, muscular hand descended

firmly on the stranger's shoulder, cutting off the sentence and whirling him around to face the Griswold Realty Company's broad-shouldered young trouble-shooter, Lafayette Muldoon.

"Watch your language, mister," Lafayette said blandly.

The hue of the man's face changed from red to magenta. He seemed on the verge of an apoplectic seizure. His mouth opened and closed two or three times with inarticulate anger.

Then: "Take your hand off me, you —you impudent fool! Do you realize who I am?"

Lafayette's handsome, usually smiling face was coldly expressionless, and his fingers tightened their hold on the beefy shoulder. He said flatly, "I don't know *who* you are, mister, but you've got no call to come into a place of business and abuse an employee who's trying to help you. So I'd suggest you have a seat——"

"What's the trouble out here?"

A round-bodied little man in his fifties came into the office from an inner doorway. He had a perpetually bewildered expression and his finely textured white hair rose to an infantile peak on the top of his head. This was Stanton Griswold, wealthy head of a real estate firm that owned and controled several million dollars' worth of property in the city's most exclusive section.

Griswold, peering at the two men beside the switchboard, took several steps toward them before he recognized the man with Muldoon. Then a welcoming smile split his cherubic countenance and he hurried forward, hand outstretched.

"Why, it's Mr. Drake!" he boomed jovially. "Good morning, sir. Anything I can do for you?"

Mr. Drake shot a malevolent glance at the young man whose hand was no longer on his shoulder. "You bet you can, Griswold! You can tell this whippersnapper who I am. Then you can tell him I'm waiting for his apology!"

THE company president turned reproachful eyes on his trouble-shooter. "Now, Lafe—you haven't been disrespectful to this gentleman, have you? This is Mr. Yancey Drake, owner of the Drake Bottling Works. He rents the Lorimer mansion out on Dewey Drive."

"How do you do, Mr. Drake?" said Lafayette equably.

Mr. Yancey Drake was not mollified. "I," he announced stiffly, "am waiting for your apology."

Lafayette avoided his employer's pleading glance. "Why, Mr. Drake," he said, smiling, "you surely don't expect me to apologize for saving your life?"

The man from the bottling works blinked. "What're you talking about? How'd you save my life?"

The young man spread his hands in a modest gesture. "You came into the office," he explained smoothly, "in a highly emotional state. If I hadn't made some move to startle you out of it, you might have suffered a stroke. Surely your doctor has warned you to be careful of overexciting yourself, Mr. Drake?"

"Well, as a matter of fact——" began Drake. Then his mouth snapped shut and he shot a narrow-eyed glance at the smiling, debonair young man. "Say, just who the hell *are* you around here?"

Griswold broke in with a hurried explanation. "Why, Lafayette's our trouble-shooter, Mr. Drake. If any of our tenants has a complaint of any consequence, Lafe straightens it out. Sort of a diplomat, you might say . He was instrumental in clearing up two

particularly difficult matters that——"*

Drake gestured impatiently. "All right, Griswold; you don't have to draw me a picture. . . . What's your name, young fellow?"

"Lafayette Muldoon, Mr. Drake."

"Humph." Drake's sharp blue eyes took quick appraisal of the young man's athletic body and the sartorial perfection of the single-breasted, powder blue suit. "Got any sense?"

The trouble-shooter's smile widened a bit. "Yes sir."

"Then take that damn grin off your face!" Drake snarled. He turned to Griswold. "I've got a beef to make. You want me to make it here, or have you got a private wailing-wall?"

"We'd better go into my own office," Griswold said hurriedly. "I'm sure if you will sit down and light a cigar and relax, any complaint won't seem so——"

"*Must* you babble?" Drake growled. "Where the hell *is* your office?"

Griswold swallowed and his ears reddened. "Right this way, sir," he said tightly, and started for the corridor that led to the inner offices.

"Hold on," Drake said at the threshold. He turned and beckoned imperiously to Muldoon. "C'mon, Pantywaist; this is going to be a job for you!"

YANCEY DRAKE accepted a cigar from the humidor on Stanton Griswold's glass-topped desk, got it burning to his satisfaction and wedged his plump backside firmly into one of the office chairs. Then he shifted his attention to the two men seated across from him.

He said, "Griswold, you know what they do to a guy who murders somebody?"

The realtor's eyes bulged. "W-what in the world——?"

"I'll tell you," Drake said evenly. "They put the murderer in a chair that has a mess of wires rigged up in it. Then they throw a switch, and—poof! —the undertaker's got a customer.

"Now, I'm allergic to electricity. I don't want to go through anything like that. So——"

"Are you saying, Mr. Drake," Lafayette interrupted, "that you've murdered somebody?"

The bottling works man impaled him with a glance. "Not yet I haven't. But I'm going to, by God—unless one of you bright boys figures out a way to make it unnecessary!"

There was a long moment of silence. Stanton Griswold opened his mouth to say something, then closed it without having uttered a syllable. Lafayette dug a cigarette from the breast pocket of his coat and reached for the desk-lighter.

"Supposing you tell us what it's all about," he said, through a cloud of smoke. "Naturally, S.G. and I will do anything possible to help you."

"Naturally," Griswold echoed hollowly.

Drake leaned forward. "Okay, here's the pitch: A year ago last May I rented the Lorimer place from you people. The place's a damn white elephant—costs a fortune in fuel bills alone—but my wife wanted it because it would 'help us socially.' That was all right with me; we'd started out poor but I had the guts and ability to make a lot of money—and I did it, too! I'm what you call a self-made man, gentlemen—and I'm damn proud of it.

"Anyway, we get all settled out in this seventeen-room castle that used to belong to Lorimer. I put twelve thousand dollars into furnishing the joint

* *Tavern in the Town*—August, 1943, MAMMOTH DETECTIVE; *Violence for Madame*—November, 1943, MAMMOTH DETECTIVE.—ED.

and sign a five-year lease with you guys—with an option to buy at the end of that time if my wife still wants to live there. My two kids are nuts about it; Bob, who goes to City College, has a few of his friends who just about *live* with us. The same goes for Joan—she's in high school and has friends whose folks are way up the social ladder. And she's prettier and smarter'n any of the bunch, by God!"

"I don't see," murmured young Muldoon, "what all this has to do with killing anybody."

Drake glared at him. "What's the matter? You in a hurry?"

"No sir," Lafayette admitted. "It's just that——"

"Then shut up! I'll do the talking; and if you don't like the way I tell it, then get the hell out. Understand?"

"Succinctly put," Lafayette said, unruffled. "Please continue, Mr. Drake."

The soft-drink magnate eyed the bland expression with brief suspicion, then took up the broken thread of his rambling narrative:

"Things go along nice and smooth until two months ago—the first day of May, if you want to be exact. Then you guys pull a fast one on me. And I don't like it, see?"

GRISWOLD stirred protestingly in his swivel-chair. "What are you accusing us of, Mr. Drake?" he demanded with a vague show of truculence. "The Griswold Realty Company is steadfastly ethical in all——"

"Hogwash!"

The round-faced little realtor bristled. "I beg your par——"

"You heard me!" Drake roared. "Hogwash! Don't give *me* that 'ethical' stuff. I'll tell you what you did, Griswold.

"You know that piece of property that bounds my place on the north? Big red brick house—Colonial style, I guess you'd call it? Twelve rooms, I'd say—maybe more?"

"That," Griswold said slowly, "would be the Hollingsworth residence. At least, it was up until two years ago. I bought it from Sam Hollingsworth's widow a few weeks after he died."

"Uh hunh," Drake said heavily. "Then what?"

"Why—er—it was rented this last May 1st. To a Mr. Disbrow—Mr. Wayne Disbrow. A very estimable gentleman, I—I believe."

"'Estimable' my—foot!" The raging magnate tore the badly chewed cigar butt from his lips, hurled it through the open window and lunged to his feet. "He's a nut—a crackpot—a loony!"

"In short," Lafayette interposed, "you would say that Mr. Disbrow is insane."

Griswold raised a rather tremulous hand. "Please sit down again, Mr. Drake. . . . Now let's get to the bottom of this. You understand, of course, that this is a serious charge . . . that is, if you are actually serious in stating that Mr. Disbrow is—ah—insane."

"I said he was nuts," Drake declared, "and I'll say it again. The guy is nuts!"

Lafayette Muldoon, perceiving that his employer was badly shaken by these constant and vehement interruptions, decided to take over.

He said, "Since it is my job, Mr. Drake, to make adjustments when things go wrong here, I suggest you answer a few questions. In that way we can get to the bottom of this matter which is so distressing to you."

"That's what I say," Drake said vaguely.

"Good. . . . Now, what sort of a man is this Mr. Disbrow? Physically,

I mean," he amended hastily.

"You mean what does he look like?"

"Yes."

"Why, he's a big fellow—better'n six feet tall, with big shoulders and a head that reminds me of a lion. Thick mane of iron-gray hair and a booming kind of laugh you can hear for blocks."

"How many in his family?"

"Well, I don't exactly know. Five or six, I guess. I do know he's not married—at least not now. I'm sure of that because right after Disbrow moved in I dropped over late one afternoon to get acquainted. You know how it is: extending the glad hand to a new neighbor, letting him see that he's among friends."

"What sort of welcome did you get?" Lafayette asked, interested.

"Now you're getting down to it!" Drake snarled. "Then's when I got my first idea that Disbrow's off his rocker. I go over there nice as you please. He's puttering around out in front. I introduce myself; he invites me into the library, hands me a cigar and an easy chair and mixes me a drink."

"I can't see anything wrong with that," Griswold observed mildly.

DRAKE'S cheeks turned a mottled red. "You can't, hunh? Well, the goddam cigar blew up when I lit it, and the drink was made of kerosene! And while I was still gagging on the stuff, somebody yelled, 'Fire!' I ran for the door—and plowed up two yards of carpet with my face. A wire had been stretched across the doorway!"

Griswold said, "For heaven's sake!" in a weak voice; while Lafayette bit back a laugh that left aching ribs in its wake.

"I," Drake resumed wrathfully, "got the hell out of that madhouse—but fast! And just two days later, while I was standing by the hedge that runs between his place and mine, Disbrow pulls another fast one. I was talking to his gardener at the time, and I'll be damned if he—Disbrow, I mean—didn't sneak up through the hedge and give me a hotfoot!"

Lafayette's explosive "No!" came so close to resembling a laugh that the bottling works owner glared at him with open suspicion. Griswold used a handkerchief to smother a violent spell of coughing.

"Perhaps the thing for you to do, Mr. Drake," the young trouble-shooter said finally, "is to give Mr. Disbrow and his property a wide berth. I'd say he is more a practical joker than a lunatic—although there's little difference between the two!"

Yancey Drake abruptly seemed very weary. "I've tried to keep away from the guy," he said. "Not a member of my household, including the servants, has gone within fifty feet of his grounds, except to pass it on the public sidewalk. So what does he do but invade *us!* Listen to this:

"A couple of nights ago, I came home late—around midnight, in fact. I was walking up the path to my own front door when all of a sudden a white figure shot up out of the ground in front of me! If you think a thing like that doesn't scare the pants off you . . . well, just try it sometime. I know my heart damn near stopped!

"Come to find out, somebody had rigged up a sheet and a long piece of elastic so that my foot would break a length of thread and set the thing off. The second it happened I heard Disbrow's booming laugh; and there he was, standing out by the street and haw-hawing his head off. I went over to him, shaking like a leaf, and asked what the hell he meant by pulling a

thing like that. I said I had a good mind to call the police; but he just looked at me with those pop eyes of his and said, still laughing: 'Why, Mr. Drake, you surely don't believe I would do such a thing, do you? The police would want proof, of course.'

"Naturally he was right—I couldn't *prove* a thing. So I told him to keep the hell away from my place, and I went in the house."

Lafayette nodded thoughtfully. "No wonder you're upset. What happened next?"

"Nothing—as far as Disbrow is concerned. But I kept thinking over what he had done; and the more I thought of it, the sorer I got. So I decided to come down here and tell you guys that either you straighten that so-and-so out to a point where he'll leave me alone or I'll bust my lease and move out!"

Griswold, with visions of trying to rent a property that Drake had correctly named a "white elephant," shuddered and rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Please, Mr. Drake," he protested. "There's no need to be so—so drastic. Why, we can fix this up easily—can't you, Lafe?"

Young Muldoon smiled. "I'm sure we can. Of course, Mr. Disbrow will have to be handled with kid gloves, so to speak. We wouldn't want him to break *his* lease either, would you, S. G.?"

The realtor blanched and sank back into his chair. "N-no! You've got to be very diplomatic, Lafe."

"Hell with that stuff!" Drake interrupted. "Either that guy stops being a practical joker—at *my* expense anyway—or you'll be referring to me as a *former* tenant. Get that?"

The trouble-shooter glanced at his wrist-watch. "It's a little after three o'clock. It might be a good idea for me to go out there now and have a talk with Mr. Disbrow. Do you know whether he's usually home at this time of day, Mr. Drake?"

The paunchy one grunted. "Sure. He's home. That guy's *always* home. Maybe if he had a respectable business to run, he wouldn't have so much time for them damn jokes of his!"

"Any idea of what you're going to say to him, Lafe?" Griswold asked nervously.

Lafayette smiled and shook his head. "None whatsoever. But I'll think of something. . . . I'll let you know how I make out, Mr. Drake. I'm sure, though, that you'll have no more trouble with your neighbor."

"You'd better be *damn* sure!" growled Mr. Yancey Drake.

CHAPTER II

LAFAYETTE MULDOON'S red Buick convertible coupe eased its rakish lines into the curb in front of the two-story brick residence at 6822 Dewey Drive, and the trouble-shooter slid from behind the wheel.

For a moment or two the young man remained standing by the car, his sharp hazel eyes flickering over the exterior of the former Hollingsworth mansion. The house looked a great deal more prepossessing than when he had last seen it four or five months before. There were new white shutters at the windows; the brick facing had been sand-blasted; and the wooden trimming was a bright fresh green. A thin round-shouldered old man in overalls was digging at the roots of a row of shrubbery lining the winding walk that led to the front of the house.

"Good afternoon, Pop," Muldoon sang out, when he had approached to within earshot of the old man. "Is Mr. Wayne Disbrow at home?"

The gardener straightened slowly

and with obvious effort. He said, "Reckon so," in a quavery high-pitched voice, and the network of tiny wrinkles about his watery blue eyes deepened as he squinted at the visitor.

"Any chance of seeing him?"

"Dunno why not. All you got to do is go in the house."

Lafayette grinned. "Sounds simple enough. Thanks, Pop."

He was turning away when the old man said, "Name ain't 'Pop', Sonny; it's Disbrow."

The trouble-shooter felt his face burn. He said, "Oh. Uh . . . I'm sorry, sir. You—you're not Mr. *Wayne* Disbrow?"

"Course not," the other said testily. "Told you he's inside, didn't I? He's my oldest boy. Crazier'n a hoot-owl, too."

"Oh." Lafayette sought to think of something to add to that monosyllable but gave up the idea when the old man calmly turned his back and resumed work on the shrubbery.

Muldoon shrugged and went on to the house. He was on the point of setting a finger against the bell-button when the door swung violently back and a shapely young woman in blue tennis shorts and a tight-fitting white sweater hurled herself through the opening, colliding heavily with him. Instinctively Lafayette reached out to prevent her from falling—and found that his arms were filled with glamor.

"I'm frightfully sorry——" she began automatically and started to draw away. Then her eyes lifted to meet his. . . .

Muldoon had a confused but pleasing impression of a cloud of honey-and-gold hair framing deep blue eyes and a very red mouth; and it was he who drew away.

Her full lips curled in a slow smile that held something of mockery and something of intimacy. "Hel-lo," she said lingeringly. "Who are you?"

Lafayette told her his name, then added: "I'd like to see Mr. Wayne Disbrow."

SHE appeared to have forgotten that she had been in a terrific rush just a minute or two before. She leaned against one side of the open doorway and looked him over from head to foot, and the mockery went out of her expression, replaced by approval.

"You're cute," she said.

The young man grinned. "G'wan, I'll bet you tell that to all the real-estate men!"

She said, "Real estate?" in a puzzled voice. It, he decided, was a nice voice: rather deep for a girl, with husky overtones.

"Yes," he said. "I'm from the Griswold Realty Company. Mr. Disbrow rents the place from us."

"Oh . . . Isn't Uncle Wayne paying his rent?"

" Uncle'?"

"Yes. I'm Milly Disbrow, his niece . . . Are you married?"

"Uh . . . No. No!" His grin had become a little forced.

"Neither am I," she said dreamily. "Of course, I'm only eighteen; that's a little too young for marriage. But I'm not too young to know the real strength and power and beauty of complete love. Don't you agree?"

"Uh . . . yeah. Sure." He ran a finger under his collar, which seemed suddenly too tight. "Now, about your uncle—Mr. Disbrow, I mean. Would you tell him I'd like to see him, please?"

Some of the warmth went out of Milly Disbrow's blue eyes. She said distantly, "Oh very well. He's in the library. You can go right in."

She stepped out to let him pass, said, "It's the double doors on the left side

of the hall," and flounced away along the winding path.

"Whew!" Lafayette Muldoon said under his breath. "Nice thing about this job, one meets such interesting people!"

He walked into the large reception hall, closed the outer door gingerly and looked around for the double doors Milly had mentioned. The hall itself was carpeted to the baseboards with a thick-piled taupe broadloom, and antique chairs and a darkwood Spanish refectory table competed for attention with two suits of shiny steel armor, complete with mailed fists holding murderous-looking halberds. At the far end, a curved staircase led to the second floor.

Several doorways gave off the hall, but only one of them had twin doors, both tightly closed. The trouble-shooter crossed the room and was on the point of rapping on one of the panels when a strident feminine voice jarred the silence.

"Young man! Young man! Just a moment, please!"

He turned to see one of Peter Arno's dowagers sweeping regally down the stairs from the second floor. She was wearing a frilly negligee of some white, cheese-clothy material that swirled about her feet and billowed behind like froth in the wake of a tug-boat. An unseen foundation garment had pushed her stomach up to meet her bosom, giving a top-heavy effect to her bulky figure.

Something in the haughty angle of her two chins put Lafayette on the defensive before she had even reached him. He said, "Yes ma'am?" warily.

"Are you prepared to marry my daughter?"

MULDOON felt his brain reel and his jaw drop. He put an unsteady hand against the wall and took a deep breath.

"Look, lady," he said through dry lips, "I don't want any trouble. I don't want to marry your daughter. I don't even *know* your daughter. Could I please just see Mr. Wayne Disbrow and then go quietly away?"

Her sniff of disbelief was more nearly a snort. "Don't lie to me, young man. I saw you making up to her at the front door. She's just a child—a sweet, innocent baby. And so impressionable. Every man she meets tries to take advantage of her. But I keep my eye on her, young man, and unless you intend to be an honest, forthright suitor ——"

"You mean," Lafayette interrupted, "that Milly is your daughter?"

"So!" she snapped triumphantly. "You *do* know her. I knew you were lying. Well, mark my words, young man——"

"I," Lafayette said, "give you my word, Mrs. Disbrow, that the moment I finish talking with Mr. Wayne Disbrow I will walk out of this house and *never* come back."

There was no mistaking the almost pitiful earnestness of his tone. The dowager eyed him suspiciously for a moment, sniffed loudly once more, then turned and sailed majestically back up the staircase.

"All in a day's work," Lafayette muttered.

He turned to the library doors and knocked—lightly at first, then, getting no response, more determinedly

There was still no answer.

"I suppose someone's murdered him," the trouble-shooter murmured moodily. Impulsively he twisted the knob and pushed open the door.

And then he was within the book-lined room, his back pressed against the closed door, horrified eyes staring

at the motionless body of a huge, gray-haired man lying beside an overturned lounge-chair.

His first coherent thought was that the man had suffered some sort of a fainting spell; but a glimpse of a glistening red pool on the rug beside the leonine head put an abrupt end to that theory.

Without moving from his position at the door, Lafayette swept a comprehensive glance over the room. Other than the upended chair and the body, everything appeared to be in order. Several leather easy-chairs, a few dark-wood tables, lamps and smoking-stands gave a masculine atmosphere to the place.

His eyes came back to the body, and to the ruddy stain that continued to gleam brightly under the radiance of the late afternoon sun pouring through the open French windows.

Ten seconds later Lafayette said coldly: "All right, Mr. Disbrow, you can get up now!"

The body stirred, rolled over and sat up. A pair of handsome blue eyes, set in an equally handsome, dignified face surveyed Muldoon with interested amusement, and a deep, resonant voice said:

"Startled you a bit anyway, didn't I?"

"I'll say you did!" Lafayette admitted. "What's the idea?"

"Just a joke." Disbrow stood up, righted the chair and dropped into it. He waved good-naturedly at one of the leather chairs and said:

"Sit down, young fellow, and tell me how you discovered I wasn't a corpse. Personally, I thought I was doing a good job of it."

Lafayette sat down carefully and leaned back. He said:

"You were doing all right." He pointed to the blob of shiny red stuff that was still on the rug. "That's what gave the show away. Real blood would have soaked into the carpet's soft pile."

The older man chuckled. "So it would. You've pretty sharp eyes, my friend."

HE BENT, picked up the "blood stain" and handed it to Muldoon. It was a rougly oval bit of colored glass about the size of his palm, carefully made to simulate a spreading pool of blood.

"Shop downtown carries a lot of gadgets along that line," Disbrow explained. "I'm their best customer. You might say my hobby is collecting such things."

"And using them too!" Lafayette supplemented, grinning wryly.

Disbrow chuckled again. "Sure. Listen; this will kill you! My sister-in-law Elizabeth is staying here. A few days ago she brought home a new white ermine wrap. She placed it across the table in the hall. When she came back to pick it up, there was an upset ink bottle on it, and a puddle of ink right in the center! She cut loose with a screech that rattled the windows, and keeled over in a faint."

"What," Lafayette demanded, "is so funny about that?"

Disbrow threw back his massive head and began to laugh—a deep throaty sound like the notes of a bass drum. Finally he managed to control himself sufficiently to dig a piece of colored glass from a vest pocket and hand it to Muldoon. It was the exact size and shape of the first; but instead of being red, it was jet black.

"I see," Lafayette said. "This was the 'ink' your sister-in-law found on her coat."

"Exactly!" And Disbrow went into a fresh paroxysm of laughter that sent tears streaming down his cheeks. He

managed to calm down after a minute or two, mopped his face with a handkerchief and looked up to meet the trouble-shooter's sober eyes.

"If you don't mind, Mr. Disbrow," Lafayette said politely, "I'd like to tell you why I'm here."

"Go right ahead," agreed the other cordially. "First, though, you must allow me to offer you a drink." He swung around to the end table beside his chair and lifted the top, disclosing a compact portable bar. "What will you have, sir: bourbon or Scotch?"

Lafayette, remembering Yancey Drake's report of the drink Disbrow had served him, thought quickly. "I'll have whatever you take, Mr. Disbrow," he said casually.

A shade of disappointment passed across the man's finely featured face. He poured two fingers of bourbon into each of two glasses and added charged water. A miniature freezing unit furnished ice cubes for both.

"Here you are, young man," he said warmly, handing one of the glasses to his guest. "Oh yes; you must try one of my special cigars."

He was lifting a cedarwood box from the table when Lafayette said, "No, thank you. I prefer cigarettes."

Disbrow's forehead wrinkled in a faint frown but he made no protest as his guest put down his untasted drink and fished a cigarette from his coat pocket.

Lafayette, watching his host take a long satisfying pull at his highball, reached for a box of safety matches on the ashstand beside his chair. With a sharp angry *whirrrr* it seemed to spring to life in his fingers, sending his heart into his throat and the matchbox flying across the room.

"Ha ha," said Lafayette Muldoon coldly, while Wayne Disbrow's booming laugh hammered at his shrinking ear drums with nauseating effect.

THE practical joker clawed for his handkerchief and applied it to his streaming eyes. "Ho-ho-ho-ho!" he bellowed. "Honestly, if you could have seen y-your face when that thing went off!"

"Anything for a laugh, eh?" Muldoon picked up his glass with an unsteady hand and sniffed of the contents. There was no smell of kerosene. Besides, Disbrow's own drink had come from the same bottles.

He lifted the glass to his lips and took a slow draught. It proved to be an excellent highball, and he had taken two full swallows before he realized some of the liquid was running down his chin. Lowering the glass, he looked ruefully down at his liquor-spotted shirt front, and Disbrow was off in another fit of laughter.

Then Lafayette noticed the line of tiny holes set in the flowered design slightly below the rim of the glass. "It —it's what is known as a 'dribble-glass'," his host sputtered. "Never fails. Why, just a couple of nights ago, Judge Lindquist was——"

"Skip it!" the young man cut it rudely. "Someday, Mr. Disbrow, you're going to pull one of these lame-brain gags on the wrong guy and get yourself slugged. It wasn't an hour ago that I heard a man say he was going to kill you if you ever tried one of your practical jokes on him again."

The smile stayed on the older man's face. "You must be mistaken. Why, everyone appreciates a good joke . . . By the way, who are you, young man? One of Milly's friends?"

"My name," the trouble-shooter said gravely, "is Lafayette Muldoon. I'm representing the Griswold Realty Company, and I've come here to ask you to keep these tricks to yourself."

"Well, well." Disbrow continued to smile but the twinkle went out of his eyes. "That sounds a good deal like an ultimatum, Mr. Muldoon."

"It is," Lafayette said bluntly. He had intended to be more diplomatic, but the memory of the whirring matchbox and the dribble-glass was too fresh in his mind. "Actually it's for your own good, sir. Some of your neighbors are sort of figuring on giving you a taste of your own medicine."

Disbrow stood up. "Good day, Mr. Muldoon."

"But——"

"There's no point in discussing this further. By neighbors, you mean Yancey Drake, of course. Frankly, I don't give a damn whether——"

"Aieeeeee!"

IT WAS a scream—a woman's scream—and it tore through the house like the wail of a fire siren. So shrill the sound so intense its note of utter horror, that Lafayette came out of his chair as though someone had shoved him; while Disbrow stopped in mid-sentence, his eyes bulging and his jaw sagging.

Lafayette acted first. With a muttered oath, he whirled about and started at a mad dash for the hallway. And then, half way across the library, he skidded to a sudden halt and turned back to confront Disbrow, who had started to follow him.

"Nothing doing," the young man declared forcefully. "I'm not going to go tearing through that door and break my neck on some wire you've strung up!"

Disbrow's face twisted with anger—and fear. "Don't be a fool. That was no gag. That yell wasn't fa——"

"Aieeeeeee!"

Both men broke simultaneously for the library door. Wrenching it open, Lafayette raced through, closely followed by Disbrow. They pounded across the hall and up the staircase as the third scream beat against their ears.

At the head of the steps, the troubleshooter caught a glimpse of a billowy feminine figure in white kneeling on the floor beyond the open door of a bedroom. He veered sharply in mid-stride and entered the room on the run. As he crossed the threshold, his feet slipped on the bare floor and he fell headlong, narrowly missing the kneeling woman.

Half-dazed, he rolled over, noticing that Disbrow had stopped just outside the door, thereby saving himself from slipping on a glazed rectangle of flooring at the room's entrance.

The woman on her knees seemed entirely oblivious of Lafayette's precipitate arrival. She was rocking gently back and forth and moaning, "He's dead, he's dead," over and over. Lafayette recognized her, now, as Milly's mother.

But his attention was no longer on the woman. There was a thin, reedy man, wrapped in what looked like a bed sheet, lying face down on the floor. And under his neck were pieces of a blue vase and the stems of yellow flowers and a viscous red stuff that wasn't colored glass. In front of the top of his head was an overturned occasional table.

Lafayette climbed painfully to his feet and looked for guidance to the man standing in the doorway. Disbrow seemed to have forgotten him; he was staring at the corpse and there was a half-guilty, half-scared look on his face. Finally he wet his lips and said:

"Elizabeth. Elizabeth. What's happened, Elizabeth?"

She gave no indication of hearing him and he fell silent, indecision strong in his expression. Lafayette stepped over to her and put a hand gently on her

shoulder.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Disbrow," he said soothingly, "but you'd better let me see how badly he's hurt. I mean, perhaps a doctor should be called . . ."

The face she turned up to him was washed clean, by tears and shock, of all the haughtiness and snobbery that had been there when Lafayette talked with her a quarter hour before.

"The Master is dead," she said tonelessly. "But the Master could not die. For the Master is beyond death as he is beyond life. How can this be, then?"

LAFAYETTE made no effort to answer a question that clearly was the product of a grief-crazed mind; instead he took hold of her puffy bare arms and managed to get her to her feet. She stood there, swaying, and he sought to urge her toward the bed; but after a single faltering step, she screamed piercingly, her eyes rolled crazily and she collapsed in his arms.

By a superhuman effort, the troubleshooter maintained his balance and succeeded in getting his limp burden to the bed. Then he wiped the beads of perspiration from his forehead, turned wearily to Wayne Disbrow and said:

"Where's the phone?"

The older man stared at him without comprehension. "Phone?" he repeated dully.

"Yes. We've got to call a doctor. And the police, of course."

Disbrow continued to stare at him with apathetic eyes. "Of course," he mumbled. His lips began to quiver and he was no longer the poised, dignified person who had interviewed Lafayette in the library. "It's all my fault. I—I killed him. But I swear I didn't mean——"

"Save it!" Lafayette snapped brusquely. He was a little sickened, not so much by the dead body on the floor as by the weak stammering contrition of the killer. "Are you going to call the police—or shall I?"

Disbrow's hands were trembling and he suddenly shoved them into his trouser pockets. "There's an extension in the next room," he said slowly.

Muldoon eyed him sharply for a moment, then turned and gingerly crossed the square of slippery flooring in front of the doorway. At the threshold he looked back over his shoulder, said coldly, "Better not touch anything, Mr. Disbrow," and went on into the hallway.

A few seconds later he was at a spindle-legged desk in a sort of combination sitting-room and den, asking the operator at police headquarters to connect him with Captain Logan of the Homicide Bureau.

CHAPTER III

THERE were handsomer men than Captain Myles Logan, and most of them were in Hollywood, playing leading roles in the movies. As a matter of fact, a movie agent had once offered Logan a contract, but had spoiled the deal—and lost three of his own teeth—by calling Logan a "pretty boy." From that day on, Captain Myles Logan had never set foot in a moving picture theater.

Just now he was seated behind the spindle-legged desk in the second floor den of the Disbrow home, his classic-featured countenance marred by a heavy frown. Seated in front of the desk were the members of the Disbrow household—and Lafayette Muldoon.

Captain Logan sighed, pushed back a recalcitrant lock of his thick curly chestnut hair and said:

"There's actually no reason for asking a lot of questions, I suppose. The coroner says that this man, Abdullah

Zek, died about three hours ago; that he evidently slipped on a patch of some wax-like substance while entering his bedroom and fell forward. His falling body crashed onto a wooden stand supporting a pottery vase of flowers, the vase shattered when it struck the floor, and one of the shards sliced into Zek's throat, severing both his wind-pipe and jugular vein. Death followed almost at once."

Except for a throaty sob of horror from Elizabeth Disbrow, none of Logan's audience made a sound. Wayne Disbrow was slouched in the depths of a lounge chair, his hands locked tightly together as though to prevent them from trembling, his haggard eyes intent on the carpeting in front of his feet. Milly Disbrow sat with her bare legs loosely crossed, the fingers of one hand absently forming pleats in the blue material of her shorts while her eyes studied the captain with frank approval. Drawn slightly apart from the others, perched stiffly on a straight-backed chair, was Gideon Disbrow, whom Lafayette had first met among the rose bushes in front of the house. He was puffing leisurely on an evil-smelling pipe, and his faded blue eyes showed his frank interest in the proceedings.

"There will be an inquest," Logan continued, "either tomorrow or the next day. It will be necessary for all of you to attend. First, though, I'll want to know a few things."

He turned his eyes to the bowed gray head of Wayne Disbrow. "It take it that you're the head of this household, Mr. Disbrow," he said soberly. "Would you mind telling me something about this man Zek—how he happened to be here, who he is, who his relatives, if any, are."

Disbrow's heavy leonine head lifted slowly; but it was Elizabeth Disbrow's voice that cut through the tense silence of the room.

"The Master was a member of our family, Captain Logan. Two years ago I induced him to make his home with us. It was an honor which we humbly sought to be worthy of. For he was no ordinary, mortal man, Captain. His was the Voice of True Faith; he was the Messenger of Holy Zoorn."

"He," unexpectedly cut in the shrill voice of Gideon Disbrow, "was a goddam fake!"

"Please, Father," Wayne Disbrow said weakly. "There's no use . . ."

Slowly Elizabeth Disbrow stood up. There was grim, purposeful anger in her face that canceled out the double chin and fat cheeks and incongruously plucked eyebrows. Lafayette, watching, felt the hackles lift on his neck.

"Please sit down, Mrs. Disbrow," Myles Logan said sternly.

She completely ignored him. Her burning eyes moved from the wrinkled face of the old man, to the handsome, dignified one of his son.

"You filthy beasts!" Her voice was hardly more than a whisper. "You hated him. You—who were not fit to lick his sandals! And you killed him—*murdered* him! For that, I will kill you—both of you!"

CAPTAIN LOGAN slapped both palms explosively against the desk top. "That's enough, Mrs. Disbrow. You sound like a particularly bad movie . . . Will you *please* sit down?"

Abruptly the woman collapsed in her chair, buried her face in her hands and began almost inaudibly to weep. Gideon Disbrow continued to draw at his pipe, his expression as tranquil as before; while his son went back to his scrutiny of the carpet. During the entire scene Milly Disbrow had kept her eyes on the homicide officer, apparently

oblivious of everything around her.

Logan said, "I'd *still* like to know who Abdullah Zek was."

"Hell, it's no secret," Gideon Disbrow said by way of preface. He knocked the ashes from his pipe into a neighboring flower pot. "Liz picked him up somewhere. Ever since Gregg —that was my other boy—died a couple years ago and left Liz a widow, she's been goin' around collectin' these disciples of some nutty cult or other. The first three didn't last over a month or two each; but Zek had more on the ball and hung on for two years. He'd run around the house in a bed sheet and a pair of wooden shoes and lecture us in bad English about eating meat and smoking and drinking. You saw him; he was a dried-up stick who looked like a T-bone steak and a stiff shot of Scotch would kill him.

"Once a week a flock of old hens like Liz would congregate over here and Zek would give 'em a spiel about Holy Zoorn and Everlasting Life in some kind of castrated heaven that he knew all about. I'll admit he was a damn good salesman; Liz was making plans to spend half a million bucks to build him a temple out north of town. But it looks like heaven wouldn't wait!"

The homicide officer drummed his fingers thoughtfully on the desk top and looked at the faces of his audience. His eyes finally met the openly worshipping ones of Milly Disbrow and he hastily transferred his attention elsewhere while a slow wave of color came into his cheeks.

"Uh . . . Mrs. Disbrow," he said, clearing his throat. "Is there anything you can add to your father-in-law's statement?"

Elizabeth Disbrow raised her tear-stained face from her hands. Despite the puffy, red-rimmed eyes and the ridiculous cheese-cloth negligee, there was something of regal dignity in her face and bearing.

"The Master," she said in low, level tones, "was a *sheik*—a nobleman—from Arabia. All of life's mysteries were an open book to him. He came to this country to spread his knowledge among those whose vision was clear enough to recognize and believe his message."

Logan got down to mundane matters. "How did you happen to find his body?"

"I—I——" She swallowed convulsively and tried again. "Each day, he retired to his room between 2:30 and 4:30 for meditation. He forbade any of us to disturb him during that period. A few minutes after 4:30, today, I went up to ask him about a personal matter. His door was closed. I knocked several times but there was no answer. I opened the door slowly, thinking he might have fallen asleep. He was on the floor—dead. He had been murdered!"

She put her face back in her hands and began to cry, louder this time—long hiccuping sobs that shook her flabby body.

THE sounds of grief seemed to penetrate Milly Disbrow's fascinated appraisal of Captain Myles Logan; for she left her chair, went over to the stricken woman and knelt beside her.

"You mustn't carry on like this, Mother," she said tenderly. "It won't bring back the Master, and it can hurt your sensitive spirit."

Elizabeth Disbrow reached blindly for her. "You poor innocent baby," she sobbed. "It's so like you to think first of me. I wish you might have been spared seeing this violence and cruelty. Men are like that, darling; they bring all the pain and viciousness into the world. They are beasts!"

Milly patted the bowed head. "I know, Mother; you're perfectly right." As she said this, she looked squarely into Logan's eyes, gave him a slow, intimate smile and closed her left eye in a deliberate wink that was more than faintly lascivious!

Lafayette Muldoon, an interested observer of these currents and cross-currents of emotion, smothered a strong impulse to laugh at this point. Evidently Milly Disbrow's innocence existed only in her mother's mind.

The officer met the girl's wink with a stony stare that finally caused her to flush slightly and look away. He said, "Twice, now, Mrs. Disbrow, you've made the statement that Abdullah Zek was murdered. Just what do you base such a charge on?"

Once again the bowed head came up. The woman's lips were tightly pressed into a line of utter hatred. Unhesitatingly she pointed a dramatic finger at Wayne Disbrow and cried:

"*He* killed the Master! There was murder in his heart; now there is blood on his hands!"

Except for a spasmodic twitch of his shoulders, Wayne Disbrow seemed not to have heard the accusation. He kept his attention glued to the rug in front of him.

Logan let loose an exasperated sigh. "Once again, Mrs. Disbrow," he said coldly, "I'm going to ask you to stop playing Bette Davis. Why do you say that your brother-in-law murdered Abdullah Zek?"

"You're supposed to be a police officer," she snapped. "I should think you'd be able to see anything so perfectly obvious."

"Nevertheless," Logan replied patiently, "I'd like to know your reasons for making such an accusation."

"My brother-in-law," she said, with a venomous glance at Wayne Disbrow, "is a practical joker. I say that he deliberately spread some sort of wax just inside the Master's door in the hope that Abdullah would slip and injure himself fatally. I wouldn't be at all surprised if he put that vase exactly where the Master would fall on it!"

"H'mm." Logan fingered his lower lip, a speculative gleam in his eye. "I noticed that patch of slippery stuff. Almost took a tumble on it, myself . . . What about this, Mr. Disbrow? You heard what your sister-in-law says?"

WAYNE DISBROW'S expression was one of tortured self-recrimination. He nodded wearily.

"Elizabeth is right, Captain," he admitted. "At least, in part. There's no doubt that I enjoy playing practical jokes; it's my hobby, you might say. Mr. Muldoon, here, can verify that.

"But I never meant for my—my hobby actually to injure anybody. But the fact is I *did* spread that waxy substance—Slippo, it's called—where Zek would be sure to step on it. I bought it only yesterday at the shop where I get all these trick gadgets. But I had nothing to do with putting that vase where he would fall on it. Such a—a freak accident couldn't possibly be arranged beforehand. Indirectly, though, I am responsible for the death of Abdullah Zek."

"So what the hell of it!" Gideon Disbrow broke in shrilly. "The moth-eaten old goat was nothin' but a screwball and a sponger. Him and his bed sheet! Why, if it wasn't for a bunch of wacky females, he'd a starved to death a long time ago. I say good riddance!"

Logan shook his head. "I'm afraid that's beside the point. The fact remains that a man is dead, and he met death through the act of another . . .

"I'm afraid you'll have to come down

to headquarters with me, sir. The district attorney will want to talk with you. It's not for me to say whether you'll be charged with anything. Offhand I'd say manslaughter—that would be the worst."

He stood up and came around the desk to where Disbrow was seated. Elizabeth Disbrow was there ahead of him, her fingers twisted into claws that reached for the face of her brother-in-law.

"You murdered him!" she shrieked. "You cold-blooded beast!"

Logan caught the insane woman by her arms and forced her back into her chair as gently as he could. "You're only getting needlessly excited, Mrs. Disbrow. Please try to control yourself."

Wayne Disbrow got to his feet. "I'm ready to go with you, officer," he said, almost jauntily. "I'll have one of the servants get my hat and coat when we get downstairs. Meanwhile, to show there's no hard feelings, have a smoke."

He dipped into a vest pocket, brought out a rich brown cigar and handed it to Logan. The homicide chief bent his head to accept a light and the two men headed for the door.

Suddenly there was a sharp *crack,* a plume of blue smoke shot from the end of Logan's cigar, and bits of frayed tobacco spattered the carpet. The captain started so violently his hat flew off and the remains of Disbrow's gift fell from his slack lips.

"Ho-ho-ho!" The practical joker's laugh boomed out. "Aha-ha-ha-ha! I wish you could see your expression, Logan. Ho-ho-ho!"

His face red with suppressed anger and embarrassment, Myles Logan bent, scooped up his hat and jammed it forcefully back on his head.

"Now that you've had your little joke, Mr. Disbrow," he said stiffly, taking the still laughing man firmly by one arm, "I'm going to take you downtown and put you in a nice cell where you can think up a good one for the D. A. C'mon!"

CHAPTER IV

THE telephone in Lafayette Muldoon's apartment was ringing as he stepped out of the elevator. He unlocked his door hurriedly, crossed the living room in four rapid strides and scooped up the receiver.

"Hello," he said sharply.

"Muldoon?" a crisp, masculine voice demanded. "You're sure a sound sleeper. Your phone's been ringing for three minutes."

The voice was familiar to Lafayette, yet he couldn't quite identify it. "I just got in," he said.

The voice expressed surprise. "At 2:30 in the morning?"

"That's right . . . Who is this?"

"Oh, sorry. This is Captain Logan, Muldoon. There's been a new development in the Disbrow case. Thought you might be interested."

"What kind of development?"

"Another death. And this time it's murder!"

Lafayette felt his pulse quicken. "I had a hunch it'd happen," he declared. "Who's the corpse — Milly or her mother?"

There was a brief pause at the other end of the line. Then Logan said, "Are you holding something out on me, Muldoon?"

"No, no. Nothing like that. Just doing a little guessing, that's all."

Logan made a noise that was suspiciously like a snort. "Then your little guess is all wet. It was Grandpop who got it!"

Lafayette almost dropped the receiver. "What! You mean Gideon

Disbrow—the old man? I don't understand how——"

"Never mind all that," Logan cut in. "I'm out here at the Disbrow home now. Suppose you hop in your car and drive over. Maybe you can help me figure this thing out."

"Sure. Glad to," Lafayette said promptly. A random thought struck him and he grinned. "Wouldn't mind seeing your girl friend Milly in a negligee, at that!"

There was no humor in the homicide chief's reply. "That," he said grimly, "is another problem. Milly has disappeared!"

"Good lord!" Lafayette gasped. "Any idea what's happened to her?"

"None at all. The old lady's throwing fits all over the place. She's a lot more upset over Milly's absence than she is about her father-in-law's murder."

"That's to be expected," the trouble-shooter observed. "You remember what she told him and Wayne Disbrow yesterday afternoon. Said she was going to kill both of them because of the way they treated her Arab. Say, come to think of it, Logan, maybe she——"

"Yeah." Logan sighed. "I thought of that. But she refuses to answer any questions until sweet, innocent, unworldly Milly is restored to her arms. I'm going nuts, Muldoon!"

Lafayette grinned into the receiver. "Now, now, Captain Logan, don't get discouraged. Wait till I get there. Perhaps I know who can supply all the answers."

"Who?"

"Me," said Lafayette Muldoon.

A UNIFORMED policeman opened the Disbrow's front door in response to Muldoon's ring. After the young man had identified himself, he was handed over to an obscure little man in a dark suit who turned out to be a detective attached to the Homicide Bureau. He took Muldoon down on a rear flight of stairs to the basement where the trouble-shooter found a fully equipped game room with a small compact bar in one corner.

Captain Logan was leaning against the bar, holding a tall frosted glass in one hand and talking in low tones with a moon-faced man of middle age. Across the room, Elizabeth Disbrow, wearing a blue bathrobe and a pair of matching mules with astonishingly huge pompoms, was crammed into a chrome chair that was three sizes too small for her. She was staring at nothing at all, while her fingers systematically tore a lacy handkerchief to shreds.

Lafayette's guide, his errand accomplished, went back up the stairs to the first floor. The trouble-shooter sauntered over to join the two men at the bar.

Logan looked up, grunted, "Morning, Muldoon." A stubble of beard shadowed his cheeks and his eyes were tired. "What the hell are you all dressed up for?"

Lafayette looked down at his stiff, immaculate shirt-front and the smartly tailored perfection of his tuxedo. "I told you I had just gotten in when you called me," he explained. "I didn't take the time to change."

"Oh . . . Muldoon, this is Doctor Selwyn from the coroner's office."

The two shook hands. Selwyn's round face was very pale and he seemed on the point of being violently sick. He said tremulously, "You'll have to excuse me, Mr. Muldoon, but I don't feel so good. I've a sensitive stomach, and what I've seen tonight hasn't done it any favor."

The homicide chief smiled wryly. "Doc's quite a problem," he told Lafayette. "You'd think a doctor would

get accustomed to seeing corpses. But Selwyn here has a job holding his dinner down every time we call him in on something like this."

"I never *wanted* to be a doctor," Selwyn protested. "And seeing a body in the condition Disbrow's is in would turn the gut of a statue!"

"What happened to the old man?" Lafayette asked.

"Dynamite," Logan said laconically.

"Dynamite?"

"Yeah. His room's down here in the basement, at the end of that hall." He pointed to a doorway leading off the game room. "Somebody evidently put a stick of the stuff among some logs in a small wood-burning fireplace he had in there. When he lit a fire . . . bang! Whoever planted it must have attached a very short fuse, because the dino went off while Disbrow was still kneeling there after lighting the fire. He got the full force of the stuff square in the chest, and . . ."

He let his voice trail off. Doctor Selwyn swallowed convulsively and looked quickly around as though he might have to leave the room in a hurry.

"H'mm." Lafayette Muldoon fished a loose cigarette from one of his pockets and picked up a small box of safety matches from a tray on the bar. He seemed surprised when the box failed to explode in his hand. "Doesn't it strike you as a bit odd that the old man would light a fire in his room on a warm evening like this?"

"I thought of that," Logan admitted glumly. "It's one of the questions I want to ask Mrs. Disbrow. But she won't tell us a thing until we find her daughter."

THE trouble-shooter exhaled twin streamers of smoke." Oh, yes. Milly. I'd forgotten about her."

"I wish I could!" Logan snarled. "Seems she gets sent to bed every night at ten. Mama went to her own room around eleven; looked in at Milly on the way. She was in bed, evidently sound asleep. At two o'clock the dynamite went off. We got half a dozen calls at headquarters within two minutes; reporting it. Among those calls was one from Mrs. Disbrow. She was having hysterics. Why? Because her daughter was missing! Not one word about an explosion that had happened in her own home! We didn't even know anyone had been killed until we got here and started poking around."

"Anything at all," Lafayette asked casually, "to indicate what had happened to the girl?"

"Nothing out of the way. She'd been in bed for a while; it was mussed and the mark of her head was on the pillow. Her nightgown was laying on a chair, and the dress and underclothing she'd worn earlier in the evening were missing. Evidently she got up, dressed and went out—all under her own power. No indication of a struggle of any kind."

Lafayette puffed reflectively on his cigarette, his eyes fixed unseeingly on the slightly parted curtains covering one of the game-room windows. He said musingly, "Does Wayne Disbrow know yet that his father is dead?"

Logan shook his head. "Not yet. He's still in jail—although we're calling it 'custody'. The D.A. hasn't decided yet whether there'll be any formal charge brought against him."

"Like that, eh?" *There was a face staring in at that window!* "He's a practical joker; for that alone he should get ten years!"

While he was speaking, he let his eyes swing calmly away from the window to the cigarette in his hand. There was absolutely nothing in his expres-

sion to indicate that he had caught a momentary glimpse of a white blob beyond the glass—a blob that could have been nothing else but a human face. He brought his cigarette carelessly up to his lips, let it linger there with his palm masking his mouth . . . and said quietly and very rapidly:

"Don't look around and don't act surprised! There's somebody pulling a peeping-Tom through the window behind you! In a second or two I'm going to turn around leisurely and start up the stairs. You keep right on talking to each other without paying any attention to me. Okay?"

"Sure," the homicide officer said. He lifted the glass in his hand and swallowed half the contents as though he hadn't a care in the world.

Lafayette turned casually away, took a few steps toward the staircase to the first floor, looked back over his shoulder and said, "Mary had a little lamb," as though adding an afterthought, then sauntered airily up the steps.

The instant the stairwell hid him from view of the window, he went into action—but fast! Two lightning strides brought him to the ground floor level and he raced along the hallway to the front door as though all the hounds of hell were at his heels.

THE uniformed policeman was sitting stiffly in a heavy antique chair near the entrance. When he saw Lafayette's flying figure bearing down upon him, he sprang to his feet and opened his mouth to bellow a protest.

"Siddown!" Muldoon hissed; and though he hardly more than whispered the word, so compelling was his tone and expression that the officer sank back without uttering a sound.

A moment later, Muldoon was standing on the tiny porch, his back against the closed door, waiting for his eyes to adjust themselves to darkness of the summer night. At this hour the neighborhood was silent and deserted, and the only light came from the stars and a dim street lamp half a block away.

Thirty seconds passed before Lafayette moved again; then he began to advance cautiously toward a corner of the house. The soft carpet of grass completely muffled his steps. Reaching the corner, he drew together the lapels of his dinner jacket, masking the white bosom of his dinner jacket. Then, every sense alert, his heart pounding dully in his ears with excitement, he put his head out just far enough to permit him to see along the side wall of the building.

Light was pouring from the two windows of the basement playroom. Sharply lined against the nearest window was the crouched figure of a man in a dark suit, his back to Lafayette.

The trouble-shooter took a slow deep breath and held it. And then he went into action!

Lowering his head, he bounded across the grass and launched himself in a pile-driving, flying tackle, as the skulking figure, warned by the sounds of pounding feet, straightened and whirled about.

The two bodies crashed together with a solid, echoing thud. Lafayette felt his shoulder sink deep into a yielding paunch, there was an explosive "Oof!" as the breath was driven from between unseen lips—and it was finished.

Lafayette, a bit dazed himself, rose quickly from the limp figure, turned and deliberately slammed his foot against the basement window. Amid the clatter of breaking glass came an excited babble of voices from the basement.

"Logan!" Muldoon shouted. "I've got him! Get up here before he comes to!"

But there was really no need to hurry. They carried the unconscious man into the front hall and stretched him out on a settee. Elizabeth Disbrow met them at the door as they came through the door. She gasped in shocked recognition as she saw their senseless burden.

"Good heavens!" she cried. "It's our neighbor—Mr. Drake!"

"So it is!" Lafayette said, aghast. "How the devil does he fit into this, I wonder."

Logan eyed the trouble-shooter sharply. "You know him?"

"Yes," Lafayette admitted. "Actually, he's the reason I came over here yesterday afternoon."

IN A few brief sentences, he told the homicide chief of Drake's visit to the Griswold Realty Company and the conversation that had taken place there. When he had finished, Logan looked down at the bulky figure of the unconscious bottling works owner and said with grim purpose:

"So he hated Wayne Disbrow and family, eh? Looks as if Mr. Yancey Drake has got some explaining to do!"

"He may have kidnaped Milly!" Mrs. Disbrow exclaimed. "I demand that you force him to tell what he's done with her!"

Logan almost said something rude, but he managed to overcome the temptation. Instead, he contented himself with saying:

"We'll have to bring him to before asking him anything. Would you mind getting some brandy, Mrs. Disbrow?"

"There's some in the library, I believe. Send somebody else to get it. I'm not stirring from this spot until I hear what Mr. Drake knows about poor Milly!"

"I'll go," Lafayette offered, smiling. "Wayne Disbrow offered me a drink yesterday, so I know where it's kept."

He crossed to the library doors, opened one and slipped through, closing it behind him as he felt along the wall for the light switch.

Suddenly he froze into shocked immobility.

There was someone else within the room!

Lafayette stood as though turned to stone, one hand still stiffly outstretched toward where the switch should be. Within the next three seconds—they seemed as many minutes—a half dozen plans of action flashed in and out of his racing mind. He might shout to Logan—and get a bullet for his pains; he might turn calmly, open the door to go out—with the same result. A cold bead of perspiration walked on crutches down his back . . .

Out of the impenetrable blackness of the room came a soft feminine voice:

"Well, my goodness, don't just stand there!"

"Milly!" Lafayette leaned weakly against the wall. "For the love of Mike!"

"Shhh! I don't want Mother to know I'm in here."

"I," Muldoon said firmly, "am going to turn on the lights."

His fingers brushed along the wall, found the button and pressed it. A soft radiance flooded the library, disclosing Milly Disbrow seated on a love seat near the French windows. Beside her sat a handsome broad-shouldered youth of about twenty; he gave Lafayette a bland, man-of-the-world stare that left the trouble-shooter completely embarrassed.

The girl met Lafayette's accusing eyes with perfect equanimity. She said, "Mr. Muldoon, I'd like you to meet Bob Drake," as calmly as though the three of them had just run into each other on the street.

Griswold's trouble-shooter registered

surprise. "Bob Drake, eh? Are you Yancey Drake's son?"

"Yeah," the young man on the couch said indolently. "You know the old boy?"

Lafayette did not answer immediately. Through the library's closed doors he could hear the mumble of voices from the hallway, among them the strident overtones of Elizabeth Disbrow.

He said, "How long have you two been in here?"

BOB DRAKE'S good-looking blond head came up sharply and a what's-it-your-business retort trembled on his lips; but Milly spoke first.

"We came home just a few minutes ago. I knew somebody was up when I saw the lights on in the hall. We slipped in through the French windows. I wanted to wait until the place quieted down so I could get back to my room without being seen. Mother'd simply have a fit if she knew I was sneaking out nights to see Bob."

"What time did you leave the house?"

"Why, right after Mother went to bed. Around 11:15 I guess. We went dancing at the Crillion Club on Marshall Road . . . Incidentally, Mr. Muldoon, what are you doing here at this hour? And what's all the excitement?"

"Excitement?"

"Yes. We saw three cars parked at the curb out in front. One is a police car. Don't tell me Mother discovered I wasn't in bed and called the police!"

"That's partly it," Lafayette admitted. "But the real rea——"

"Muldoon!" Logan's bellow reached them from the hall. "Never mind the brandy. He's coming out of it."

Lafayette turned his head and shouted, "Okay. I'll be right out."

He looked back to the two young people on the love seat. "Listen," he said rapidly, "there's been——"

One of the library doors was flung violently open and Elizabeth Disbrow sailed militantly into the room.

"What are you doing in here so long, young—— *Milly!* My poor baby!"

And Mrs. Disbrow went puffing across the room toward the girl, arms outstretched to infold her in loving embrace. Bob Drake took one startled glance at her padded bulk and left the couch with commendable alacrity.

She plopped down beside Milly and caught the girl to her in a smothering embrace. "You dear, darling child! You gave your mother *such* a scare! Did some nasty man kidnap my sweetums?"

"Mother!" the red-faced girl protested, pulling away from the clutching arms. "Please. I'm all right. Nothing has happen——"

"So!"

Every eye in the room swiveled to the library doorway from whence had come that single, snarled ejaculation. A thick-set, paunchy, middle-aged man in a dark, wrinkled, grass-stained suit was standing there flanked by Captain Myles Logan and the uniformed policeman.

Bob Drake's juvenile *sang-froid* had gone out of him like air from a punctured balloon. "Hi, Dad," he mumbled through a sickly grin.

"Don't you 'Hi Dad' me, you young pup!" Yancey Drake roared. "I *thought* I'd find you over here. Don't think for a minute that I didn't know you were chasing after this little tramp ——"

"How *dare* you!" screamed Elizabeth Disbrow. "My daughter is a sweet, innocent——"

"Aw, Dad, that's no way——"

"——and if you don't stay away from her——"

"——child, and I'll have the law on you for——"

"——to talk about the girl I love ——"

"SHUT UP!"

CAPTAIN LOGAN'S thundered command jarred into silence the tumult of shrill voices. He said quietly, "You folks can straighten out your personal matters after I've finished investigating the murder."

The Drakes and Milly Disbrow stared at him open-mouthed.

"M-murder?" the elder Drake faltered. "Who's murder?"

Elizabeth Disbrow seized her daughter in another protective embrace. "My poor child!" she began, in throbbing tones, "you must be brave! A terrible thing has happened!"

Milly shoved her away impatiently. She said to Logan: "Has something happened to Uncle Wayne?"

The homicide officer said, "Take a chair, Mr. Drake . . . All right, Davis, you can go back to the front door."

The uniformed man went out, closing the library door behind him. Logan crossed the room and sat down in one of the leather arm chairs, first turning it until he could face the others.

He said, "At approximately two o'clock this morning, a stick of dynamite exploded in the fireplace of Gideon Disbrow's room, killing him instantly. It seems pretty evident that he didn't put it there himself, so that makes it murder. Since it's my job to solve matters of this kind, I'm going to ask you people some questions."

"Now look here, Officer," Yancey Drake said belligerently, "I haven't had anything to do with the bunch of screwballs that lives here. Neither has this chippy-chasing son of mine. So we're going on home."

"You are going home," said Logan evenly, "when I get through with you —and not before."

Drake hoisted himself angrily out of his chair. "I'll have your badge for this!" he sputtered. "I'm a respectable citizen and a tax——"

"You," Logan said, "were also prowling around somebody else's private property at three o'clock in the morning! Now sit down and shut up!"

Yancey Drake's face suddenly turned a sickly white and he collapsed into his chair.

"We'll start with you, Mrs. Disbrow," Logan continued. "Tell us, please, what took place here from the time I left yesterday afternoon, about six o'clock, until I returned at 2:15 this morning."

"Why—why there's nothing of any interest to tell," Elizabeth Disbrow said uncertainly. "After you had arrested my brother-in-law and removed the—er—mortal remains of Abdullah Zek, I went to my room to lie down for a while.

"Milly came home from her tennis date at 7:30 and we had dinner. The cook and the housekeeper—the only servants we have—aren't here nights; they left about 8:30. Gideon went out to a lodge meeting about that time; I didn't hear him come home. Milly went up to bed at ten o'clock, her usual time. About an hour later, I got very sleepy, so I locked the doors and put out the cat and went to bed too. Actually, I was so exhausted that I didn't bother taking my nightly sleeping powders.

"At two o'clock there was the most terrible explosion in the basement. I jumped up, put on my robe and slippers and ran to Milly's room to keep her from becoming frightened. Her bed was empty. I ran through the house, calling for her, then telephoned the police. That's all."

"You didn't go into the basement to learn what had caused the explosion?"

Logan asked.

"No. I—I was afraid to. I thought it might have had something to do with Milly's absence."

"Didn't you think to call your father-in-law, to ask him if he might know where Milly was?"

"No-no. We—we haven't been what you'd call friendly—particularly after the way he spoke about the Master yesterday."

CAPTAIN MYLES LOGAN tugged thoughtfully at his lower lip for a moment or two. Then: "Mrs. Disbrow, just now you said that you locked the doors before retiring. What doors did you lock?"

"Why, the front and rear doors."

"Both were unlocked until then?"

"Yes."

"The rear door opens into the kitchen, doesn't it?"

"Yes."

"And there is a door in the kitchen that leads to a staircase into the basement?"

"Why, yes. But——"

"Now, you say that Gideon Disbrow left the house last night at about 8:30 and had not returned before you went to bed?"

"That's true."

"Where were you during those two hours or so?"

"I was in the sitting-room on the second floor, reading. Milly was with me, there, until she went to bed."

"And during that time," Logan said, "you and your daughter were alone in the house?"

"Yes."

"So," Logan observed calmly, "it is quite possible that somebody could have entered the house through either the front or rear door, gone into Gideon Disbrow's basement room, placed a stick of dynamite among the fuel in the fireplace, then left the house without you knowing anything about it. Isn't that true?"

"Goodness!" the startled woman exclaimed. "We might have all been murdered in cold blood! Who could have done such a horrible thing?"

"That," Logan said shortly, "is what I intend to find out."

Lafayette, half-leaning and half-sitting on the arm of an overstuffed chair, said, "May I ask a question, Captain Logan?"

"Go ahead."

"Mrs. Disbrow," said the trouble-shooter, "can you tell us why Gideon Disbrow would light a fire in his room on a warm July night—particularly at two o'clock in the morning?"

The woman sniffed. "If you'd known the old . . . him, that wouldn't seem unusual to you. He sat up every night until three or four o'clock, either reading or fooling around at his work bench. And he kept a fire going in that fireplace every night; claimed his room got damp and chilly because it was in the basement. Goodness knows I tried to get him to take one of the upstairs bedrooms often enough; it's embarrassing to have people discover that my father-in-law slept in the basement."

The homicide chief and Lafayette Muldoon exchanged knowing glances. "In other words," Logan said slowly, "the killer knew Gideon's habits."

"That," Muldoon said, "was what I was getting at."

Logan took a small note-book from one of his pockets and made several notations in it with a pencil stub. Then he turned to where Milly sat, and said:

"Where were you when the explosion took place, young woman?"

MILLY, her voice clear and perfectly steady, told him the same

story she had given Lafayette a few minutes earlier. During the recital, her mother's expression registered increasing astonishment. And when her daughter had concluded, Elizabeth Disbrow was the first to comment.

"Why, Milly, darling," she protested throatily. "How *could* you deceive me so cruelly? Haven't I tried to keep you from the sordid side of life? Haven't I warned you about men and their——"

"Oh, stop talking like an old fool, Mother!" Milly said impatiently. "If you'd have your way, I'd end up being a repressed old maid, or something. You should read Sigmund Freud or Havelock Ellis on sex and behavior."

"Milly!"

Logan said, "Stop it!" through his teeth. "I'll remind you again that this is an official investigation of a murder. . . . Now, Miss Disbrow, let's get this straight. You met Bob Drake at the corner at 11:30. He drove you to the Crillion Club, where you danced until 2:30. Then the two of you came back here, sneaked in through the French windows and were hiding here until Muldoon found you. Right?"

"Yes sir," Milly said equably.

"What I want to know," growled Yancey Drake, "is what they were up to in a dark room."

"Mister Drake!" Elizabeth Disbrow, the picture of outraged dignity, started to draw herself from the love seat. "How dare you suggest such a thing! Leave this house immediately, or I shall summon the police!"

"Please!" shouted Myles Logan. "Madam, I am the police! And either you people stop this bickering or I'll take the whole bunch down to headquarters and question you one by one. . . . What about this, Bob? How long did you have to wait at the corner for Milly to show up?"

"About fifteen or twenty minutes," the blond young man said sullenly.

"See anybody around who looked suspicious?"

"No."

"Okay. . . . Now, Mr. Drake—senior—what about you? What was your idea in peeking in these windows? Ever been arrested before on such a charge?"

"You've got a hell of a nerve, asking *me* that!" rasped the red-faced man. "Maybe you don't realize it, but I'm the owner of the Drake Bottling Works and I can buy and sell you fifty times over!"

"I don't give a frazzled damn *who* you are," Logan said coldly. "I asked you two questions; either you answer 'em or by God I'll take you downtown and sweat the truth out of you! Which is it going to be?"

"Okay, you win," Drake growled, unsubdued. "But I'm not forgetting this. . . . The explosion over here woke me. I didn't know where it came from—thought it might have been in my own house. I got up and started looking around; that's when I found out Bob wasn't home.

"I knew he'd been making up to this . . . girl; and when I saw lights on in the Disbrow place, I figured maybe he was over there. So I got dressed and came over to see.

"Well, I didn't want to ring the doorbell and ask if Bob was around—I got no use for this bunch of screwballs and they know it!—so I looked in a couple of windows on the chance of spotting him.

"Then the next thing I know, some darn fool sneaks up and hits me with a club."

Lafayette discreetly offered no correction.

Logan gave Drake's story a few moment's thought, then said, "All right; you and your son can go."

AFTER the bottling works owner and the blond young man had left, Logan said, "Do you know anyone who might have desired the death of Gideon Disbrow, Mrs. Disbrow?"

"No."

"You threatened him today, didn't you?"

"I . . . I was upset."

"H'mm. I guess that's all for now, Mrs. Disbrow. You and—uh—Milly can go to bed now, if you like."

The girl got up and helped her mother to rise. "You'd better take your sleeping powders, Mother," she said affectionately. "You'll get no rest without them, after all the excitement."

The woman leaned wearily against her. "I know, dear," she complained. "I'm simply all unstrung."

"I'd like to ask you something, Mrs. Disbrow," Lafayette Muldoon said unexpectedly.

They looked at him—the woman with suspicion, her daughter with approval, and Logan with hope.

"Just what business of yours is this?" Elizabeth Disbrow demanded.

Logan hastened to bridge the gap. "Mr. Muldoon is sort of an assistant of mine," he explained. I'd appreciate any help you can give him."

"Humph. What is it you want to know, young man?"

The trouble-shooter dug a cigarette from his pocket and reached for a match. He said, "Who will inherit the major part of Gideon Disbrow's estate?"

She stared at him in honest bewilderment. "*What* estate?"

"Why, his money—his property," Lafayette explained, surprised.

"How perfectly silly!" Elizabeth Disbrow snorted derisively. "All he owned was the clothes on his back. I gave him a monthly allowance. The only one in this family with any money was Gregg—my husband. His will provided that his fortune should go equally to Milly and me. In the event of our deaths, the money was to be divided between his father and his brother. Of course, if Milly married before my death, her inheritance was to be given into her keeping."

"Thank you," Lafayette murmured. "That's all I wanted to know."

The two women turned to leave. Logan said, "We'll have to remain a while longer, Mrs. Disbrow. My men haven't completed their examination of the basement as yet. I'll lock up when we leave."

"As you wish," Elizabeth Disbrow said indifferently. "Come, Milly."

When the two men were alone, Captain Logan said, "What was your reason for asking whether the old man had any money, Muldoon?"

Griswold's trouble-shooter drew thoughtfully on his cigarette. "My mistake," he admitted ruefully. "I figured maybe he got murdered for his money. . . . You can see now why the old girl wants to keep Milly away from the boys. In case she married one of 'em, Mama would have to surrender half of Papa's dough!"

Logan grunted and slid deeper into his chair. "The boys will be finished downstairs pretty soon. I told 'em to go over Grandpop's room carefully. If you're in no hurry we can kinda talk things over while we're waiting."

IT WASN'T more than ten minutes later that they both heard it: a dull thump from overhead that seemed to shake the house. Logan stopped abruptly in mid-sentence, said, "What the hell was that?"

They heard a door bang open on the second floor and the clatter of heels hurrying along the corridor. Then silence followed—a heavy, strained si-

lence that found both men holding their breath. . . .

"*Aieeeeee!*"

"Here we go again!" Lafayette muttered. He leaped from his chair and raced for the open library door, Logan at his heels.

In the hall they found Davis, the uniformed policeman, lumbering toward the stairs, a gun in his hand. Logan waved him back to the door, and he and Muldoon bounded up the steps to the second floor.

Milly Disbrow, very lovely in a revealing nightgown, her honey-and-gold hair falling loosely about her face, was standing in the doorway of one of the bedrooms. She was holding the back of one hand against her open mouth and the blue of her eyes seemed much deeper in contrast with the absolute lack of color in her cheeks.

She said, "She's in the bathroom. I think she's dead." Then her wide eyes got even wider, the pupils rolled back and she slumped forward in a faint.

Lafayette caught her deftly in his arms, swung her up against his chest and entered the bedroom behind Logan. Pausing long enough to place the unconscious girl on the bed and draw the spread across her scantily clad body, he went into the private bath, where Captain Myles Logan was already kneeling beside the huddled figure of Elizabeth Disbrow.

"Looks like she's a goner, all right," Logan said, without glancing up. "I think Doctor Selwyn is still downstairs; tell Davis to send him up here, will you, Muldoon?"

THEY were having coffee in the library while waiting for Doctor Selwyn to complete his examination upstairs. The coffee had been Logan's suggestion; and Muldoon had volunteered to do the job.

Milly Disbrow, a thin peach-colored negligee over her night gown, was sitting on her legs in one of the leather chairs and staring moodily at nothing at all. Her eyes were perfectly dry and her expression composed; she seemed more puzzled than griefstricken.

Footsteps sounded in the hall outside, and a moment later Doctor Selwyn came into the room. His round puffy face was marked with lines of weariness and distress.

"What did you find out, Doc?" Logan asked in a quiet voice.

Milly glanced up at sound of his voice. Selwyn saw her and seemed reluctant to answer the homicide chief's question.

Logan's fingers made a drumming sound on the arm of his chair. He said kindly, "If you'd rather not hear this, Miss Disbrow . . ."

"It's all right; I'm not a child."

"Of course. . . . Well, Doc?"

"Poison," Selwyn said gruffly "Cyanide, I'd say. Hit her like a bolt of lightning."

"Go on," Logan said, his handsome face without expression.

"There was a pink box of sleeping powders on the bathroom sink. Every paper in it contained the same kind of poison that killed her."

In the silence that followed, they heard the front door open and close, followed by a murmur of voice. A moment later two men in white passed the open door of the library and went softly up the stairs. One of them carried a rolled-up stretcher. Lafayette got up and closed the door.

Logan cleared his throat loudly, said, "We'll be leaving in a few minutes, Miss Disbrow. Of course, you won't want to stay here . . . alone. Have you a friend or relative who can put you up for a few days? If so, I suggest you call and tell them. I'll be glad to drop

you there."

"No. I live here and I'm going to stay here." Her composure seemed so perfect that it was unnatural. "I'd have to make a lot of explanations to friends, and the only relative I have left is Uncle Wayne. Besides, a couple of my boy friends are stopping here at eight o'clock this morning to pick me up for a tennis date. I must be here to explain why I can't go with them. And Mrs. Pierce, the housekeeper, will be here at 8:30. She'll look after me."

The captain looked down at his hands. "As you wish," he said quietly. "I'll leave Davis in the front hall until the housekeeper arrives. So you won't be alone in the house."

"As you like," she agreed indifferently.

Lafayette Muldoon stood up suddenly, said, "Would you mind stepping out in the hall for a minute, Captain Logan?"

Outside the library, the door closed, the trouble-shooter said, "If you're going to let Milly Disbrow stay here, you've got to be damn sure nothing's been left in her room that might kill her!"

Logan nodded. "I've already thought of that. The boys are going over the place with a fine-tooth comb. They'll find any——"

"Captain Logan."

The two men in the hall glanced toward the head of the stairs. A young man in a gray suit was standing at the railing there.

"What is it, Blake?" Logan asked.

"Can you come up here a minute? We've found something you oughta see."

THEY went up the steps quickly. The young man took them into a bedroom that couldn't possibly have been anyone else's but Milly Disbrow's. The bottom drawer of a maple highboy had been drawn out and its contents piled neatly on the nearby bed.

Blake pointed at the open drawer. "Take a look in there," he suggested.

Logan reached in and picked up a long loose coil of oily paper tape. He stared at it for a long moment, then lifted it to his nose and sniffed critically.

Lafayette, unable to learn anything from the other's expression, said impatiently:

"What is it, Captain?"

"This," Logan said grimly, "is wrapping from a stick of dynamite!"

"Good God! You mean that Milly . . .?"

"Looks like it." Logan bent again and took a second object from the drawer. "Here's a bottle of some kind of powder." He unscrewed the cap, poured a few of the tiny crystals into the palm of one hand, sniffed at them cautiously and rubbed them between thumb and forefinger. "It's not cyanide; I'm sure of that. Probably the sleeping powders she replaced with the poison itself."

"You going to arrest her?"

The officer shrugged. "Hell, I don't know. It's pretty flimsy evidence, but it's all we got. Hard to believe a girl like that would fool around with dynamite."

Lafayette said, "Look, Logan. Let it go. Don't say anything to her about finding this stuff."

"Why?"

"I've got a hunch, that's all. And it won't be necessary to look any further for something that might kill her. She's perfectly safe."

Logan regarded him steadily for a moment, said, "Okay, have it your way." He turned to the man in the gray suit. "You boys finished with the basement and the bathroom?"

"Yeah. Both bodies have been taken

out. We sorta had to scrape up the old man."

The trouble-shooter said, "Ugh," and put his hand over his mouth.

When they reached the foot of the staircase, the library door opened and Milly Disbrow came out. Logan said, "We're leaving now, Miss Disbrow. Are you sure you don't mind staying here?"

"Not at all, Captain," she said composedly.

"Very well then. If you should want anything, Officer Davis will be on duty here in the hall."

Milly eyed the middle-aged, dour-faced patrolman and said, "I'm sure it won't be necessary for me to bother Officer Davis."

Outside, the darkness had given way to the light-streaked gray that presages dawn. Lafayette glanced at his watch, said, "Whew! Quarter to five. And I'm supposed to be at work by 9:30 A.M."

"You want to be in on this thing when I break the news to Wayne Disbrow?" Logan asked.

"When are you going to tell him?"

"Just as soon as I get to headquarters," Logan replied. "This thing's too big to waste any time on. He may be able to give me a lead of some kind."

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," said Lafayette Muldoon.

CHAPTER V

AT HEADQUARTERS, Logan and Muldoon took an elevator to the top floor of the modern eight-story white stone building. They stepped out into a carpeted reception room where a uniformed attendant got up from a desk behind a neat metal railing, saluted and said, "Morning, Captain. "You're up early."

"No rest for the wicked!" Logan said, without trying for originality. "Donahue, this is Lafayette Muldoon, a friend of mine."

Donahue had a stocky figure, a ruddy face, and his rather shapeless nose was a trifle off center. He said, "I'm pleased to meetcha, Mister Muldoon," like he meant it.

"How'd our guest behave last night, Mike?" Logan asked.

"Like a perfect little gentleman. Never gave me an ounce of trouble. You want to see him?"

"Might as well."

Donahue opened a drawer of the desk, took a key from a row of pegs inside, and led them through a doorway opening off the reception hall.

From all appearances, Lafayette decided, the corridor they were following might have been a part of some first-rate hotel. Doors—ordinary walnut-stained doors without the slightest suggestion of steel bars about them—lined both sides of the passage, and each bore a number. A spotless, unfrayed hall runner muffled their steps completely.

Logan shrewdly guessed what was running through the trouble-shooter's mind. He said, "Maybe this doesn't look like your idea of a jail, Muldoon, but don't let it fool you. Every room up here is completely soundproof. Those doors are made of steel, painted to resemble wood. The rooms are furnished like a sitting-room, each with an in-a-door bed. Here's where we keep folks when we don't want them to think they've actually been arrested. Soon as they're booked, though, they go downstairs behind ordinary bars."

They stopped in front of one of the doors. Donahue unlocked it, stepped aside to allow the visitors to enter then closed it again from the outside.

The in-a-door bed was down and there was a mound in its center that was covered with a sheet. The light of early morning filtered through a good-

sized square of glass bricks in the far wall. A gentle snore issued from the bed.

Logan went over and prodded the mound. "Pile out, Disbrow," he said loudly. "You've got company."

Wayne Disbrow sat up, yawned widely and ran his fingers through his mane of graying hair. He said, "Good morning, Captain. It *is* morning, isn't it?" Then he caught sight of Lafayette Muldoon and his eyes indicated surprise. "Mr. Muldoon, eh? Don't tell me they've arrested you, too!"

"Nothing like that," Lafayette told him soberly.

Disbrow yawned again, then swung his legs over the side of the bed and reached for his neatly folded clothing on one of the room's two straight-backed chairs.

No one spoke until Disbrow had gotten into his shoes and trousers and was back from the tiny washroom. As he reached for his shirt, Logan said, "I'm afraid I've some bad news for you, Mr. Disbrow—very bad news."

The big man's fingers kept busy with the buttons, but he turned his head to stare at the speaker. "I meant it as a joke, Captain Logan," he said sharply. "I certainly never dreamed he'd fall on a vase and—"

"I'm not talking about Abdullah Zek," the officer said shortly.

Wayne Disbrow picked up his tie and began to knot it deftly about his neck. He said, "All right, then. What's the bad news?" as though he didn't care very much.

Logan wet his lips, hesitated, then said very simply: "Your father and your sister-in-law were murdered last night."

THE necktie slipped from Disbrow's nerveless fingers and he sat down suddenly on the bed. "Jesus!" It was a whispered sob. "Are you . . . serious? I can't believe . . . can't under——Who—who did it, Captain Logan?"

"We don't know," Logan admitted woodenly.

Disbrow swallowed. Some of the color came back into his cheeks. He said, "Tell me about it, please."

And so Logan told him. It took only a moment or two. He confined the explanation to a bare recital of the circumstances involved and the methods used in taking the victims' lives. No mention was made of the officer's suspicions or of clues uncovered.

When the homicide man was finished, Disbrow looked up with haggard, accusing eyes.

"What about Milly?" he demanded.

"She is safe," Logan told him.

"You mean you left her in that house—alone?"

"Not alone, no. There is an officer in the place; he'll stay there until I remove him."

Disbrow was glaring at him now. "Good God, man, are you blind? Can't you see that somebody is systematically wiping out my entire family? The only reason, probably, that I'm not dead myself, by this time, is because I've been here at police headquarters! She may be dying at this very moment, simply because you can't see past the end of your nose!"

Lafayette Muldoon said, "There's something you don't realize, Mr. Disbrow."

The man turned his head quickly to stare at the young trouble-shooter. "Well?"

"Your niece," Lafayette said slowly, "may be the killer!"

Disbrow gasped so sharply the air whistled in his throat. "You're insane!" he shouted. "She's a girl—a child. What possible basis can you have for so fantastic a charge?"

Lafayette's face was expressionless. "The wrappings from a stick of dynamite and the sleeping powders taken from your sister-in-law's medicine chest were found in a drawer in Milly's room."

Wayne Disbrow's eyes betrayed how heavily the information had struck him. He said, "Then why didn't you arrest her? . . . I'll *tell* you why. You knew those things were planted there by the *real* murderer! That's why you didn't arrest her. But it's only one reason. You had a second. *You left her in that house as bait!* You haven't the slightest idea who killed my father and sister-in-law. But you knew that whoever it was, he would strike again—at Milly. And so you deliberately set a trap . . . with Milly as bait! Of all the cruel, inhuman——"

Captain Logan's expression stopped the raving man. He said, "You are wrong, sir; we don't do things that way."

"Of course," Disbrow said brokenly. "I'm sorry, Captain." He stood up and began to pace the floor. "But the fact remains: "Milly is in danger. . . ."

Suddenly he stopped in front of Logan, facing him. "Tell me: Have I been formally charged with any crime?"

Logan shook his head. "No. I have an appointment with the district attorney at 9:00 this morning to discuss that. It will probably depend on what the inquest jury has to say about Zek's death."

"All right. So until the inquest is over, I ask that you allow me my freedom. . . . . No—wait!" He held up one hand as Logan was on the point of replying. "I want to be with Milly, Captain—to protect her. I'm all she has now. I'm well known in this city and I'm a man of some standing in my community. Any time you want me, you'll have no trouble finding me. You've simply *got* to do this for me, Captain Logan."

"You're forgetting one thing, Mr. Disbrow."

"What's that?"

"Following your own line of reasoning that the killer is out to eradicate the Disbrow family, isn't he likely to strike at you, too?"

Disbrow brushed the suggestion off with an impatient gesture. "I can take care of myself," he said gruffly. "How about it, Captain, will you allow me to go home—now?"

Logan rubbed a bristly cheek meditatively. "I don't know why not," he said slowly. "It seems reasonable enough, under the circumstances."

He walked over to the door of the room and touched a button set in the wall. A moment later there was the sound of a key in the lock and Mike Donahue came in.

"Mr. Disbrow is leaving us, Mike," Logan said. "See that he gets back whatever personal property he turned over to you when he was admitted."

Disbrow, beaming, shook Logan's hand warmly. "You won't regret this, Captain," he promised.

"I hope you're right," Logan said.

TWENTY minutes later, in the ground floor coffee shop next to police headquarters, Captain Myles Logan was still expressing doubts as to his wisdom in permitting Wayne Disbrow a freedom that might cost the man his life. Lafayette Muldoon, his audience of one, seemed singularly inattentive, being apparently immersed in his own thoughts.

Finally Logan broke off in mid-sentence and nudged the trouble-shooter sharply in the ribs. "Hey, Muldoon."

Lafayette started, turned to look blankly at his companion, and said, "Huh?"

"You haven't been listening to a word I say! Damn it, do you have to slam a door in a man's face while he's talking to you? I've probably sent a man to his death, yet you won't even listen when I try to justify——"

But again Lafayette wasn't listening. Instead, he was staring at nothing beyond Logan's shoulder, and the light of an incredible discovery was dawning in his eyes.

"*That's* your answer, Logan!" he yelled exultantly, oblivious to the startled glances of the other patrons. "That was the one thing I needed!"

Logan's slack-jawed bewilderment was almost pathetic. "What was the one thing you needed . . . for *what?*"

"The remark you just made. About slamming a door. Now I know who the murderer is!"

The homicide chief never hesitated. Without a word he reached under the left lapel of his coat and brought out a blue steel .38 revolver, then thrust it back. "Let's go," he said.

Thirty seconds later, a smudge of blue exhaust smoke marked where Lafayette Muldoon's red Buick convertible had been standing in front of police headquarters.

CHAPTER VI

IT WASN'T much after six o'clock when Lafayette and Logan reached the block containing the handsome Colonial residence of the Disbrow family. Lafayette let the car coast the last hundred yards of the deserted street before pulling silently in at the curb.

With a lithe bound he cleared the car door and ran lightly along the walk leading to the house. Logan was right behind him. The front door was closed; but Lafayette, ignoring the bell button, turned the knob and walked in.

The patrolman, Davis, sprang from his chair as they entered. Muldoon held up a warning hand and said, "Shhh," in a sibilant whisper.

Davis blinked suspiciously at them with sleep-heavy eyes but closed his mouth obediently. Lafayette put his lips close to the uniformed man's ear and muttered: "Did Wayne Disbrow get here yet?"

"Yeah," Davis whispered.

"How long ago?"

" 'Bout ten-fifteen minutes."

"He upstairs?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. We're going up. If you hear any funny noises, you come after us—fast. Got it?"

The officer said, "Yes sir," in a respectful undertone as the two men turned and started on tiptoe for the staircase leading to the second floor.

The door to Milly's room was closed. Lafayette unhesitatingly bent and applied an eye to the keyhole. Other than a lamp standard and an unoccupied chair, he could see nothing. But he could hear the faint murmur of voices from within and that was all he needed.

He straightened, looked at Logan, who had removed the .38 from his holster, and cautiously closed his left hand around the knob. He prayed silently that the door would not be locked. But there was no reason why it should be. With a hard, quick motion he twisted the knob and flung open the door.

MILLY DISBROW, young and appealing in a thin housecoat over her nightdress, was seated at a small desk in a far corner of the bedroom. A sheet of paper was on the desktop and there was a fountain pen in her right hand. Standing next to her was Wayne Disbrow, dressed as Lafayette had last seen him.

Their heads came around quickly at sound of Lafayette's entrance. At sight of the gun in Logan's hand Milly shrank back in alarm; the man showed surprise but no fear.

It was Wayne Disbrow who spoke first. He said, "What do you gentlemen mean by breaking in here this way? And put down that gun, please, Mr. Logan; you're frightening my niece."

Logan ignored him. Lafayette said, "Would you mind standing up, Miss Disbrow?"

Slowly the girl rose from her chair. The light from the desk lamp made a golden halo of her hair.

"Come forward a few steps, please," the trouble-shooter said mildly. "Both of you. . . . . There."

He went around behind them to the desk and picked up the sheet of stationery Milly had been writing on when he first entered. The gun in Logan's hand was pointed at neither the man nor the girl, but both knew it was there.

The few lines on the paper were brief and to the point:

I killed them both. I placed the dynamite in the fireplace and the poison in the box of sleeping powders. I wanted the money I felt was rightfully mine. But remorse and guilt weigh so heavily on my heart that

The note ended there, interrupted, probably, by Muldoon's arrival.

The young man put the sheet of paper back on the desk, glanced fleetingly at a small bottle of colorless liquid standing near the lamp base there. He said: "It's difficult to believe that you murdered them, Miss Disbrow. I doubt that the police could have proved you guilty even if they had suspected you."

The fear in her expression changed first to bewilderment, then to actual anger. "Good heavens, Mr. Muldoon," she gasped, "are you saying I killed my own mother and grandfather? How perfectly ridiculous?"

He pointed to the note on the desk. "Are you denying you wrote that confession?"

"Of course I wrote it. I——" She stopped there and looked appealingly at Disbrow. "You'd better tell them, Uncle Wayne; I don't want to."

There was compassion in Disbrow's expression as he met her eyes. "It's no use, Milly," he said quietly. "Any denial would be worthless against that confession." He turned to Logan. "I arrived home about a quarter of an hour ago. Milly called to me as I was passing her door. She told me she had killed her mother and grandfather; that she was going to write a letter admitting her crimes, then take her own life by the same poison she had given Mrs. Disbrow. I tried to persuade——"

"Uncle Wayne!" cried the astounded girl. She drew away from him in horror, her face ashen. "How can you *say* such a terrible thing? Why are you——"

"Supposing," Lafayette interrupted, "you tell us your side of the story, Miss Disbrow."

SHE seemed not to have heard him. Her eyes were on Wayne Disbrow, and in them were such hatred and revulsion that her accuser looked hastily away.

"Yes," she said finally, "I tell you. I'll tell you what really happened." Her voice was flat, almost emotionless, and her burning gaze remained on the man who had named her a killer. "He came into my room a few minutes ago and woke me. He said he was the one who had placed the explosive in Grandfather's room and the poison in Mother's box of sleeping powders. But, he

told me, his conscience was tormenting him so that he couldn't stand it any longer. He was going to write a letter confessing his crimes, then commit suicide by taking poison. He took a bottle from his pocket, told me it contained the same kind of poison he had given my mother, and set it down on the desk.

"I tried to dissuade him from doing such a thing, but he would not listen. His hands were trembling badly and he seemed all broken up. At his insistence, I gave him a sheet of paper and a pen and he sat down at the desk to write the confession. But his hands were shaking so that he couldn't do it. So he asked me to write what he dictated. That's what I was doing, Mr. Muldoon, when you came in."

Muldoon pursed his lips thoughtfully. "It hangs together all right," he admitted. "But then so does your uncle's story. So we'll have to look at other facts in the case to discover which of you is lying."

Captain Myles Logan went to Wayne Disbrow, ran his hands expertly over the man's body in search of concealed weapons. Then he slid his gun back into its holster and turned to the two Disbrows. He said, "One of you is lying, of course. I want to know who—and I want to know now!"

The girl said, "I told the truth," as though she didn't care whether he believed her. Wayne Disbrow merely shrugged helplessly and looked down at his hands.

The homicide officer turned to Muldoon. "Back at the restaurant, you said you knew who the murderer was. Do you?"

"Yes," said Lafayette Muldoon.

"All right," Logan said. "Who?"

"Wayne Disbrow."

RELIEF flooded Milly Disbrow's face and she sat down suddenly on a chintz-covered chair. Her uncle was staring at the young trouble-shooter, his expression a mixture of incredulity and anger. He said stiffly, "By God, this is—is intolerable! I demand to know the reason behind this accusation, Captain Logan. Why, I wasn't even in this house when the murders took place!"

Logan was eyeing Muldoon speculatively. He said, "Can you furnish any proof that Mr. Disbrow killed his father and sister-in-law?"

Lafayette leaned back against the desk and groped through the pockets of his tuxedo coat until he found a loose cigarette and a book of matches. Three pairs of eyes watched him set fire to the tobacco and release the first lungful of smoke. Then he said:

"It all goes back to a dead man's will—the one Gregg Disbrow made. He was the only Disbrow with any money, and he left it all under the control of Elizabeth Disbrow, his wife.

"Wayne Disbrow, here, didn't like living on what amounted to charity. For one thing, it hurt his pride; another reason was his love for practical jokes was turning Mrs. Disbrow against him. Any day she was liable to get fed up with his pranks and give him the old heave-ho! Nobody would have put up an argument if she had; Grandpop thought his last son was crazy—he told me so himself—and Milly was wrapped up in her own interests.

"So Wayne Disbrow decided to kill off everybody who stood between him and the swag. With Elizabeth and Milly out of the way, the money would go to him and his father. But he figured as long as he was going to have to bump people off, he'd just as well include the old man and get his share too!

"He figured all the angles out and came up with what looked like a foolproof plan: murder two of 'em and fix it so the third would take the rap.

"Living in the same house with his intended victims, he knew their personal habits and routines. So he planted dynamite in Pop's fireplace, poison in Elizabeth's sleeping powders and evidence in Milly's dresser drawer. Then he went happily off to jail and let the corpses accumulate!"

WAYNE DISBROW said, "This is all nonsense," composedly. He permitted himself a rather forced smile. "I'm afraid a jury wouldn't be as patient about hearing all this as you seem to be, Captain Logan."

"Go on, Muldoon," Logan said, unperturbed.

"When you and I went into Disbrow's room at headquarters, Captain," Lafayette said, "one of the first things he wanted to know, after you'd told him what had happened here, was what had become of Milly. He fully expected you'd say she was under arrest; and when you told him she was still out at the house, he started to worry. Of course, there was the possibility that you hadn't discovered the dynamite wrappings and sleeping powders in her room; but when I mentioned that the stuff had been found, he figured we thought it had been planted there and that Milly was innocent. So he said as much, thereby giving the appearance that he was defending the girl.

"Right there in jail Disbrow did some fast thinking. He sold you on the idea of letting him out to protect Milly; then he beat it out here to the house, fixed up a bottle of cyanide solution and came into Milly's room and woke her up. He put on his act of contrition, faked the business about his hands trembling so badly he couldn't write and got her to do it for him. You can bet that the minute she finished writing that confession, Wayne Disbrow meant to jam that bottle of cyanide into her mouth and make her swallow the contents. Then he'd have gone back to his room and waited for the body to be discovered. Everything would have been complete: Milly a suicide, empty poison bottle on the floor, confession—unsigned but in her handwriting—on the desk, and the money eventually going to him. Hell, it was perfect! It was even better than his original plan!"

Logan said slowly, "I'm afraid you're forgetting something, Muldoon."

"Yeah? What?"

"There was no reason for Mr. Disbrow to anticipate his own arrest before you came to see him yesterday afternoon. After Abdullah Zek's body was found, he had no chance to plant the dynamite and poison; you, yourself, were with him all that time. And by your own reasoning, he wouldn't have set those traps until he knew he was to be taken into custody."

Lafayette grinned unabashed. "Now you're getting to the keystone of the whole thing!"

"Meaning what?"

"Abdullah Zek. . . . Look, Logan, it all narrows down to one thing: if Zek died because of an accidental fall against the vase that cut his throat, then Disbrow couldn't have set the murder traps. Right?"

"I'm listening."

"Then change your way of looking at Zek's death. Don't regard it as an accident resulting from a practical joke that went too far. Call it, instead, a deliberate, cold-blooded *murder!*"

LOGAN shook his head. "That's a mistake every amateur detective makes, Muldoon," he said. "You can't take a fact and twist it around to fit a theory; you've got to twist the theory to fit the fact."

"Exactly, Captain Logan," interposed Wayne Disbrow. There was a

triumphant smile on his round face. "Mr. Muldoon has been doing nothing else all along but mangle facts. But he's talked himself into a trap by proving that I'd have had to murder Zek before I could possibly have killed the others. And it's perfectly evident that the Arab died by accident."

Lafayette ignored him. "Let's get this straight, Logan," he said crisply. "Unless I can prove that Disbrow murdered Abdullah Zek, nothing in what I've said means anything to you. Is that correct?"

"That's the way a jury would look at it, probably."

"All right then; I'll prove it. . . . If you'll remember, Gideon Disbrow told us that his sister-in-law was going to spend half a million dollars to build a temple for Zek. For all Wayne Disbrow knew, there might have been such a provision in her will. Therefore, there were two reasons why the Arab had to die. One: to prevent any possibility of his getting all that money; two: as a means for getting Wayne Disbrow put in jail before the murders of Elizabeth and Grandpop took place.

"So I say this: Sometime between two and three o'clock yesterday afternoon, Wayne Disbrow went up to Zek's room, knocking him out—he was a little, weak-looking guy—smashed a vase and jabbed a hunk of it into Zek's throat. Then he set the stage—body, vase, flowers and overturned table—the way we found it, spread a coating of Slippo in front of the door and sneaked out. He knew nobody would dare disturb Zek during the Master's two-hour meditation period, so he, Disbrow, would have plenty of time to set the other murder traps before Zek's body was found."

Disbrow's face was very white, but the stiff, unnatural smile was still on his lips. He said, "You haven't a bit of proof to back up these wild claims."

Lafayette got off the desk and walked over until he was standing directly in front of Wayne Disbrow.

"I haven't h u h ? ' ' he snapped. "How's your memory, mister?"

The gray-haired man swallowed. "Pretty fair—why?"

"Do you recall," Muldoon said, "what your sister-in-law told Logan yesterday while he was trying to get the facts about Zek's death? Do you remember her answer when Logan asked how she happened to find the body?"

"Not exactly," Disbrow admitted slowly. "But I——"

"I'll tell you her answer," Muldoon snarled. "She said that she came upstairs to see Zek. His door was closed. She knocked several times but got no response. So she opened the door and walked in. Zek was dead on the floor. Isn't *that* what she told Logan?"

"Why, yes, I believe it was. But——"

"Are you trying to tell me," Lafayette thundered, "that Abdullah Zek came walking into his room, slipped on that wax, fell on the vase and cut his jugular vein, *then got up and closed the door before lying down to die?*"

The smile fled from Disbrow's lips and he recoiled as though Muldoon had struck him. He lifted a hand to his quivering mouth. "My God! I shouldn't have closed——"

Captain Logan, a trifle dazed himself, stepped forward and took the demoralized man by the arm. "You're going back to headquarters, Mr. Disbrow," he said grimly. "And this time you're going to stay there!"

But Lafayette Muldoon had the last word.

"It's going to be another practical joke, Disbrow. You'll be asked to sit down in a chair. But this time the joke will be on you. Because, you see, that chair is going to be full of electricity!"

O'Sheen felt pity well up in his Irish heart as he extricated the limp figure from the wreckage

O'SHEEN SEES RED

By LEROY YERXA

Brewster's wife died in a speeding car. Paddy's pity changed to anger because he completely missed seeing red

PADDY O'SHEEN wandered along the sidewalk that bordered Highway 17, close to the edge of town. He realized vaguely that the sedan which passed him was travelling too fast. But, as Highway 17 was under the rule of the state police, he muttered a few choice oaths and forgot it. The expensive car whizzed out of town, over the hill and down the long grade toward the Illinois Central Railroad viaduct. Paddy resumed his stroll, and returned, in a day-dream, to the chocolate cake Marta had promised for dinner. O'Sheen's comfortably padded figure proved that he was neither loath to eat good food, nor carry the result around his waistline.

CRASH!

O'Sheen stopped short, the memory of the speeding sedan hurtling back into his thoughts. He was sure he had heard the final, sickening impact of steel against the solid cement support

that bordered Highway 17 under the viaduct.

There was no further sound. The very finality of it made his blood run cold.

Willy Evans peddled by on his bicycle.

"Better hurry up, Paddy," Willy shouted over his shoulder. "That was a super-crash if I ever heard one."

O'Sheen left the comparative comfort of the sidewalk and broke into a sluggish dog-trot. He wasn't built for speed. He puffed hard, fighting for his breath, and reached the top of the hill. Below, a blot on the otherwise quiet green valley, the sedan leaned crazily against the viaduct.

At least one of them was alive, Paddy thought. Before he was half way down the hill, a man climbed stiffly from the driver's seat and waved his arms frantically, signaling O'Sheen.

"Hold your horses," Paddy wheezed. "Sure, and I'm a wreck myself!"

O'SHEEN stared fixedly at the still, white-covered figure on the stretcher. His throat was all tied up in a knot. He wondered what he'd do if this were Marta.

Chief Walter Henderson, Paddy's boss, was questioning Walter Brewster, the dead woman's husband.

"Still can't understand how it happened," Henderson insisted. He was very sorry for Brewster, but he had to make some pretense of settling the problem.

Howard Brewster was a stout, carefully dressed little man. He adjusted his expensive, pearl gray gloves as he talked. His eyes were red, but he managed to keep his voice calm.

"I told Mr. O'Sheen what happened," he said. "Later, perhaps, we can talk. Now, it's pretty hard . . ."

"It's all right, Chief," O'Sheen said. "They were traveling pretty fast at the top of the hill. He lost control."

"Pardon me," a voice said behind O'Sheen, and anemic, vulture-faced Doc Hargreave edged into the little group. He spoke directly to Brewster.

"I suppose you'll want your wife's —er—remains returned to the city?"

Brewster found a handkerchief and dabbed his eyes.

"Please," he said, and fumbled for his wallet. He removed a fifty-dollar bill and passed it to the doctor. "Take care of everything for me. I'm—I'm afraid I'm pretty badly mixed up."

"Sure, and I'd think you might be," Paddy O'Sheen broke in. "I think Mr. Brewster should leave with—with his wife, if he wants to."

"I'll drive you into town," Henderson offered. "Your car will be at the county garage when you want it."

Brewster shuddered.

"I'll send Peter, my chauffeur, for it. He'll dispose of it for me. I couldn't stand having it around after . . ."

Henderson nodded.

Paddy O'Sheen let his eyes trail away from Brewster's tense face. He could understand what a strain all this must be. He winced, remembering the crushed, gaping wound in Mrs. Brewster's forehead. He had lifted her tenderly from the car and, when he saw that every speck of life was gone, placed her on a seat cushion beside the road.

Paddy's eyes grew misty.

For the first time he knew how helpless a tiny, beautiful woman could be. Her lips were drawn and colorless. He stared down at the reproachful, saddened face. In death she seemed plain, almost freshly scrubbed.

One limp arm had fallen from the cushion, and the smooth, unpolished nails made her hand seem so fragile that it startled him.

Paddy was still dreaming when Brewster spoke to him.

"I appreciate your help, Mr. O'Sheen." He extended a gloved hand. "It isn't often a man feels that he has met a new friend."

O'Sheen didn't seem to hear. His face had suddenly turned a shade darker. His mouth closed grimly. He stared over Brewster's head at the retreating ambulance.

"Paddy!" Henderson said sharply.

O'Sheen snapped out of it.

"Huh?" He accepted Brewster's outstretched hand. "Sure now, and it's no more than any peace officer would do."

He knew that Brewster was still muttering words of thanks, but his mind was far away again. Brewster had mentioned that he would have a chauffeur pick up the car.

Why hadn't the chauffeur been driving? O'Sheen wondered if it meant anything. Maybe not, but there were two or three things that bothered his sense of balance.

SKINNY FARRELL backed the ancient tow-car bumper to bumper with Brewster's wrecked sedan. He stuck a freckled face from the window of the cab and shouted to O'Sheen.

"Does that do it?"

O'Sheen was sitting on the steep bank that led up to the track level. He looked up thoughtfully and nodded.

"Good enough," he said.

Skinny climbed slowly out of the tow truck, picked a long blade of grass and inserted it between his teeth. He sauntered slowly around the car, stopping near the badly crushed right side.

"How in hell could anyone pile up against that viaduct with driving conditions all perfect?"

Paddy scowled.

"Hey," Skinny shouted. "You said there was a dame killed in this mess?"

O'Sheen jumped to his feet. Skinny had kicked something out of the dirt and was holding it between his fingers.

"This ring must be hers," he said. "Though I don't see how it amounted to much."

O'Sheen took the tiny gold band from him. He squinted at it thoughtfully.

"Looks like the stone was crushed in the setting," Skinny offered. "Must have hit something a stiff crack. Darned if I knew you could crack a diamond."

O'Sheen nodded.

"Darned if *I* did," he agreed grimly.

O'SHEEN felt stuffy and uncomfortable in the new, blue-serge suit. He waited before the door, wondering if they had heard the bell. He had wandered into Brewster's garden and found his way to the two-story garage. Fresh curtains on the second floor told him that the chauffeur probably lived here.

He was about to press the bell-button again when he heard foot-steps descending the stairs. The door opened and a freshly shaven, uniformed man in his early thirties came out. Peter, the chauffeur, looked as though he might become a good 1-A applicant in a short time. There wasn't anything about him that breathed dishonesty.

"Hello," he said. "Anything I can do for you?"

O'Sheen grinned, and they both liked each other at once.

"My name's O'Sheen," he said. "Wanted to ask you about the accident."

Peter scowled.

"I been expecting you."

O'Sheen tried to hide his amazement.

"Expecting me?"

"Oh, don't get excited about it," Peter said. "Brewster—may the devil get the old goat—told me what to say if anyone started checking up on him."

Paddy's eyes narrowed.

"And I take it you don't *like* being told?"

Peter chuckled.

"That's right," he admitted. "I only work here, and I don't want any part of Brewster's family trouble."

"Wait a minute," O'Sheen begged. "Does Brewster quarrel with his wife?"

"He *did*," Peter replied dryly, "the day the accident happened. They did everything but sling the kitchen sink at each other. Brewster wanted me to tell you I had Monday off."

"And you didn't?"

"Nope," Peter said. "He ordered the car early in the morning. Said they were driving up to the Green Stream Country Club. Later he said it was a nice day and he'd drive himself. Had me leave the car in the rear drive. They left right after I took the car around."

"And that was at what time?"

"Noon, or maybe ten after."

O'Sheen nodded. That was about right. It was twenty to one when the car had hit the viaduct.

"Say," Peter started eagerly, "do you think . . .?"

"No," O'Sheen interrupted. "Not very often . . . Ever hear of a diamond that would crack with a single blow?"

Peter shook his head.

"Not the kind I spend *my* money on," he said.

"That's what I thought," O'Sheen replied, holding out his hand. "Glad to get a chance to meet you."

The chauffeur laughed heartily.

"Not going to tell me any secrets, I see. I planned to go up after the car today. Want to drive back with me?"

"Do I look like a man who enjoys walking?" O'Sheen asked.

O'SHEEN heard the metallic click of the phone and a voice answered.

"Green Stream Country Club."

"Hello," O'Sheen said. "This is the police department calling. Did a Mr. Walter Brewster make reservations with you for Monday night?"

He cupped his hand over the phone, after the voice promised to check the club record.

"Marta," he called.

Marta O'Sheen came from the kitchen, wiping her smooth, pliant fingers on a flour-covered apron.

"And what might my hero be wanting?" Her eyes twinkled.

"Would you be willing to sell your engagement ring—if you had one?"

Marta shook her head. "Certainly not," she said emphatically. "Why would you be asking that . . .?"

"Oh! Hello," O'Sheen ignored her answer to return to the phone. "Yes—Walter Brewster."

Another pause, then:

"Well! What do you know about that!" Paddy said, and hung up.

"Now you listen to me, Paddy O'Sheen. If you think all this mystery . . . ?"

She stopped, seeing the worried look in his eyes. O'Sheen, she decided was either a very clever man, or he had more bad luck than most men.

"Paddy," she said tenderly. "You aren't going out again tonight?"

"No," he said slowly. "Not—tonight. I got to do some thinking. Right now I'm not quite sure."

She left him, returning to the kitchen. Death was a very unpleasant thing, and it affected Paddy more deeply than most men. Perhaps that was why he could sense violence where others failed to find it. Death had to be justified, and O'Sheen was a hard man to convince.

"I'M DAMNED if I can see it," Henderson grumbled from the back

seat. "Brewster's worth millions. The theory doesn't hang together."

O'Sheen's eyes never left the road. He drove slowly and listened to Doc Hargreave chuckle at his side.

"O'Sheen's talk makes good sense," he insisted. "I agree with him."

"Damned if I ain't *always* wrong," Henderson said plaintively. "Maybe O'Sheen oughta be chief of police."

Hargreave snorted.

"Don't think everyone in town ain't thinking the same thing," he shouted. "Paddy's refusal to accept your job is the only thing that saved you when he cleaned up the Warner* killing."

Henderson lapsed into silence and Paddy O'Sheen turned several shades redder.

They reached the outskirts of the city and turned into the richly settled section. O'Sheen found his way to the correct address and stopped before the tall, spacious mansion.

On the porch, he waited until the others were grouped around him. He rang the bell. Almost at once a butler appeared.

"What can I do for you gentlemen?"

Henderson cleared his throat.

"We'd like to speak to Mr. Brewster," he said, and lifted his lapel so the butler could see his badge.

The butler opened the door.

"Will you wait in the hall please?" His voice wasn't pleasant. "I'll call Mr. Brewster at once."

In three minutes, Walter Brewster came in, dressed in slippers and a blue wool robe. To O'Sheen, he looked very pale and uneasy.

"I'm sorry you boys were kept waiting." Brewster attempted a smile. "Come into the library, I'll order something for you."

"Don't think that's necessary," Henderson said nervously. "We have a couple of questions."

"About the accident?"

"About your wife," Doc Hargreave said quietly, "and how she managed to get killed in an accident that you escaped from without a scratch."

There was no mistaking the coldness of Brewster's expression.

"It seems to me that we covered everything thoroughly," he said. "You're a little out of bounds, aren't you? Suppose you go to the city police?"

O'Sheen had been listening quietly.

"You were playing your game in *our* territory," he snapped. "We didn't ask you to dump a dead woman into our arms."

Brewster stiffened. His eyes were flinty with anger.

"You get the hell out of here," he shouted. "Or *I'll* call the police. I don't have to take insults from you yokels."

O'Sheen's face was very red. His fists clenched at his sides.

"Did you know that your wife cancelled the reservations at the Country Club?" he asked. "You should have renewed them before you left the house."

Brewster's eyes faltered and moved away from O'Sheen. Paddy thought he could almost *feel* the man's emotions. Brewster was in a tight spot. He must be asking himself: "How much do they know? *How much do they know?"*

"I—don't quite understand," he faltered.

"I think you do," O'Sheen continued. "The chauffeur was to drive you there Monday afternoon. At noon you told him you'd drive yourself."

"It was a nice day to drive," Brewster defended himself weakly.

"You fought with your wife in the morning," O'Sheen said coolly.

Brewster laughed, but it sounded

* Mammoth Detective, February, 1944, "O'Sheen Minds the Baby."—Ed.

hollow and insincere.

"Fight with Elsa? Don't be absurd. That's the weakest argument you could fabricate. Everyone knew we were very devoted."

"Does everyone know that she sold her jewelry and substituted paste stones for the originals?"

BREWSTER backed away from O'Sheen slowly.

"Where did you find . . .?"

He stopped short, realizing that he had betrayed himself.

"For some reason, your wife needed money. I don't care to know why, and I don't expect we'll find out." O'Sheen was laying his high cards down swiftly now. "You fought with her Monday, lost your temper and hit her with a blunt instrument."

Doc Hargreave nodded grimly.

"A nasty sock on the forehead," he said. "Probably a poker. There are several fireplaces here."

O'Sheen went on.

"You decided to make it look like an accident. You told Peter you'd drive yourself. You carried your wife to the car and started out to create an accident."

Brewster sank into a chair, crossed his legs and lighted a cigarette. Perspiration stood out on his upper lip.

"You have the imagination of a five-year-old," he told O'Sheen. "But go on."

"You drove past me going about sixty miles an hour," O'Sheen said. "You knew someone would remember that. Then you slowed down on the hill and hit the viaduct a glancing blow, knowing you couldn't get badly hurt yourself."

"A freak accident," Brewster snapped.

"Freak, is right," Paddy admitted. "You knew you could claim that she hit her head on the dashboard."

Brewster's fingers were shaking. He had forgotten the cigarette in his hand.

"Supposing such a thing were true," he said. "Just how would you prove it?"

O'Sheen took a threatening step forward. For the first time that he could remember, he was about to lose his temper completely.

"Sure, and I've a good mind to put you out of your misery without botherin' about the proof. You destroyed your wife's paste jewelry, but you overlooked one thing. A man would never think his wife would sell even her engagement ring, would he? The stone in the engagement ring was also paste, Brewster."

Brewster started forward in his chair.

"She —wouldn't . . ."

O'Sheen took the ring from his pocket and passed it to the little man. Brewster seemed to grow smaller. He looked like a helpless, caged animal. His eyes met O'Sheen's and there were tears in them.

"But, what was I to do," he begged. "She wouldn't tell me what she had done with the money. She sold fifteen thousand dollars worth of diamonds. It might have been another—man."

O'Sheen looked at Henderson.

"He'll sign a confession now," he said.

Brewster seemed puzzled. He sank back into his chair. His eyes were on O'Sheen's ruddy face.

"But—the whole thing seemed so easy," he protested. "Now that it's over, I'm not sorry. I couldn't sleep. But how did I betray myself?"

"You didn't," O'Sheen said. Now that the triumph of the hunt was over he felt let down and disgusted. "Your wife betrayed you."

Brewster's cigarette dropped to the floor.

"My wife?"

Paddy O'Sheen nodded.

"Women like to look their best when they go to a party," he said. "You said you were on your way to the Country Club. When I first saw your wife's body, I wondered why her face wasn't made up, and why there was no polish on her nails. There aren't many women who would go out without nail polish, lipstick and powder."

"You didn't tell us that," Henderson protested.

Doc Hargreave shook his head sadly. "And to think I took care of the body and didn't even notice."

Paddy's neck got red and he felt uncomfortable.

"It looked funny to me," he admitted. "So I checked up with the chauffeur and the Country Club. The ring gave me the motive.

"I was so mad, when I guessed what had happened," O'Sheen continued, "that I was seeing red."

"You might say, that because you *didn't* see any red, you *did* see it," Hargreave offered. "If I know what I mean, and I'm not sure I do."

THE END

COAL AND IRON POLICE OF PENNSYLVANIA

By LEE OWENS

SINCE the origin of the Coal and Iron police in 1865, created at the insistent requests of prominent owners of the numerous bituminous industries in the state of Pennsylvania, much publicity has centered around the brutality and inefficiency displayed by the men portraying themselves as officers of the law. The purpose of this organization was to provide protection to and from the inhabitants of the small communities which are comprised entirely of employees of the various companies and their families.

By means of an Act passed in 1865, the Governor was given authority to select and appoint private police at the request of any person owning collieries, furnaces or rolling mills. The method by which this was accomplished was the submission of a list of names to the Governor, who in turn passed them on to the Commission Bureau for the purpose of conferring commissions upon the chosen men and assigning them to the various companies. Very little investigation was made to determine the past history of the men, in spite of the fact that they were permitted to carry guns and other equipment normally allotted to a first class policeman. Although they were selected for the purpose of protecting the property of the county in which they were employed, there was no provision in the statute which denied them power on any other property.

With so much authority in the hands of these often incompetent individuals, it was inevitable that criticism would prevail as a result of improper punishment commensurate with the crime. Since these "policemen" were vested with an abundance of power and no one to account to, they often took the law into their own hands by beating and, in one instance, killing an offender.

With the advent of increasing complaints came the amendment in 1923 when the form of application was changed, requiring that the applicant be a citizen of the United States, a citizen of Pennsylvania and a resident of the Commonwealth for at least one year prior to his application for a commission. It was also stipulated that he was to furnish two reputable references and an account of his employment during the preceding three years. It was further decreed that these commissions were to confine the policemen to specific counties in which the property of the company was located.

While this assuaged in some measure the fury and revolt of the citizens, it was not of much value in curbing the power of the Coal and Iron police and therefore outrageous treatment of offenders in the name of the law continued.

The attempt made by the Pennsylvania legislature to readjust the entire situation by removing the privileges and police authority of these men and designating them merely as watchmen and overseers of the company property was met with strong resistence by the influential owners and finally voted down. However, an amendatory bill was passed which required that the company post a $2000.00 corporate bond for each private policeman commissioned to them, which would make for more diligent investigation of the individual selected. Then too, it was provided that the state police were to act as investigating agents and to submit monthly reports on the private police forces to the Governor. The Coal and Iron police were then qualified as "Industrial Police," obliged to wear a badge designating their status and confine their activities solely to protection of the property assigned to them.

TEA PARTY FRAME-UP

By ROBERT MARTIN

IT WAS Saturday afternoon, about a half hour before the first post time, and I was sitting at the bar reading the racing sheets when this girl came in again. She was a nice-looking girl, well-dressed, but she looked a little out of place in a joint like the boss runs. She went over to Harry who sat at a desk in front of the big blackboard. I heard her say, "Twenty dollars on Black Boy — to place."

Harry said, "All right, miss," and he punched her a ticket and handed it to her. She dug down in her purse and counted out twenty dollars. I noticed that the last two dollars were in halves and quarters. Then she went over and sat down at a table against the wall and ordered a coke. The bartender brought it and she just sat there drinking it and watching the clock on the wall.

I sighed, put down the racing forms, and went over to her. This was part of my job—the part I never liked. But I knew the boss would do it himself if he found out about her—and give me hell besides. I sat down at the table across from her.

She looked at me, startled, and I said, "Take it easy, girlie. I work here. You look like a nice girl, and you shouldn't be in here. This is the third time, and every time you've lost. Black Boy ain't got a chance. And the other nags you bet on didn't have a chance, either. Counting today, you've lost a hundred and twenty bucks, and you can't afford it. My boss don't like people who can't afford it to come here. So you'd better stay away."

Her chin came up a little and her pretty eyes flashed. "How do you know I can't afford it?" she asked.

I didn't like to do what I did then, but I had to do something to keep her out of the place. Dames like her are poison to the gambling racket. Me and the boss had found that out long ago, and it was part of my job to spot 'em. Maybe this dame was different, but I wasn't taking any chances. The boss got run out of a town once because a woman lost all her dough, including her baby's milk money, in his place, and then she went out and jumped in the river. And another time a dame went broke at the crap table and she went straight to her fourth floor walk-up and plastered her brains all over the wall. We had to leave that town, too.

So I reached over and grabbed this girl's purse before she could do anything about it, and dumped the contents on the table. There was the usual woman's junk, and a dollar bill, two dimes, three pennies—and three pawn tickets. I put the stuff back in her bag and looked at her. She had her head down and she was crying.

In accepting her invitation to tea
he had nothing to lose—except his life!

"Sorry, girlie," I said, "but I had to do it."

She kept her head down and she didn't say anything. I looked at the clock and saw that it was just about time for the first at Belmont. Black Boy was running in that. Harry went over to the ticker and the crowd gathered around, everybody talking loud. And then two guys came pushing through the crowd. One of them was a big, good-looking, well-built guy wearing a straw hat and double-breasted green suit. The other was shorter and older, with a narrow gray face. His mouth was set in a steady grin exposing a too perfect set of false teeth. He was dressed in a heavy baggy brown suit and a felt hat. Both of these guys were strangers to me, so I kept my eye on them. That is part of my job, too.

The big guy waved a fist full of money at Harry and yelled, "Hey, wait a minute! A hundred bucks on Lady Blue."

THE odds on Lady Blue were eight to one. Harry looked at the guy and then at the clock. "Sorry," Harry said. "Too late."

"Too late, hell!" said the big guy. "The race hasn't started yet. What kind of a gyp joint is this?"

Harry turned and looked at the tape, then he looked over at me. I nodded and Harry said, "Okay," and grabbed the guy's money and gave him a ticket. Then he went back to the ticker and by the way the tape was coming out I knew that the race was on. In a couple of minutes Harry came out of the crowd and went over to the blackboard and marked up the results. Lady Blue came in first. The big guy laughed out loud, and his ratty-looking pal grinned wider than ever. Harry paid them off, said, "Next time get your bet down sooner."

The big guy, still laughing, said, "Sure, pal, sure."

Harry finished marking the results on the board. Black Boy came in seventh. I looked at the girl, then, and she was watching the board, too. I saw her face go white. She picked up her purse, started to get up, and there was a funny look in her eyes.

"I said, "Wait a minute, girlie," but she didn't seem to hear me. I got up and grabbed her arm and she looked around at me as though she had never seen me before. I took out my roll, counted out a hundred and twenty bucks and held it out to her. She looked at me and then at the money. "No, thanks," she said.

"Take it," I said. "It's the boss' orders. Only, don't come back."

"No," she said. "You are very kind. But I don't want the money."

"Don't be a sap, girlie," I said. "You gotta eat."

"Don't you worry," she said. "I'll eat." And she smiled faintly at me and turned and walked away. She was sure a pretty kid and she couldn't have been over twenty-one or -two. Somehow I liked her looks. Something told me that she was an okay gal, and I had seen lots of dames in the years I had been bumming around. She didn't look tough, and yet there was a wise look about her eyes. I watched her walk towards the door.

And then this big guy who had won the dough on Lady Blue stopped his laughing long enough to notice her. He headed her off before she made the door and started to talk to her. She tried to push past him, but he held her back with a hand on her arm. She tried to pull away from him and he grabbed her arm tighter and guided her to the door, still talking. She held back and shot a kind of helpless glance around the room. The boss don't go for that kind of stuff

in his place, and I didn't like the big guy's looks anyway, so I went over.

The guy saw me coming but he didn't let go of her arm. I spoke to the girl. "Do you know this gentleman?" I asked.

She looked at me, said, "Yes, I know him——"

The big guy butted in. He said, "Aren't you a little out of place?" And he gave me a nasty grin.

I said, "Maybe," and looked him up and down.

The girl pulled her arm free and stood back. "I know him," she repeated, "but I don't like him. He bothers me."

That was what I was waiting for. I said, "Okay," and I looked at the big guy. "I was going to tell you this anyway. Scram."

THE little bird in the baggy brown suit had shuffled up and was standing there listening. "You, too," I said. "I don't want to see either of you in here again."

Baggy Pants showed his false teeth. I suppose he thought he was smiling. "Goodness gracious," he said. "I don't understand. What have we done, may I ask?"

"I didn't like the way you bet that horse," I said. "I didn't like that and I didn't like the way you"—I looked at the big guy—"was treating the lady. So get out. Now."

Still showing his fake grinders the little guy looked up at his pal. "Dear me, Albert," he said. "I believe the man is serious."

Albert said, "Yeah. I'm scared." There was an ugly look on his handsome face. "I wonder if he acts as tough as he talks."

I figured that I had wasted too much time talking to them already. And I was beginning to get mad. Some of the crowd in the place were starting to look at us. The girl turned to the door. "I'd better go," she said. "Thank you."

"No, wait," I said. I had started this and I had to finish it. I took hold of Baggy Pant's arm, and gave his big pal a push. "I'm not kidding. Get going."

Baggy Pant's thin lips suddenly closed over his shining perfect teeth. "Don't you dare touch me," he said in a kind of a hiss, and his hand darted upwards to the inside of his coat.

I slapped him hard across the mouth. He flopped backwards against the wall. A wicked-looking little two-edged knife fell out of his hand and clattered to the floor. The crowd was gathered around behind us now, and some dame lets out a little scream. I swung around at the big guy just about in time. He had already started a right for me, and as I turned I ducked under it and my fist smacked up against his jaw. He went back on his heels. I grabbed him then and pushed him past the check-room and out the door. He landed on the sidewalk on his hands and knees. On my way back in I met Harry pushing the snarling little guy past me. Harry pushed him outside, closed the door and handed me the knife. I took it, said, "Thanks, Harry," and went over to the girl.

People were crowding around her, asking questions. She saw me coming and pushed her towards me. "I'm sorry," she said. "I guess I caused you a lot of trouble."

"Forget it," I said. "Come on. I'll take you home." I figured that the quicker I got her out of there, the better. The boss don't like any kind of rough stuff in his place, and I was going to have some explaining to do. He hires me to keep things running nice and quiet, but sometimes it is pretty hard to do. I took the girl by the arm and guided her out to the sidewalk. My two

pals were nowhere in sight.

"Where do you live?" I said. "How far?"

SHE gave me an address clear across town, and I said, "We better ride." We walked to the corner, and in a minute a taxi rolled up, and we got in. I gave the driver the address and then I sat back and looked at the girl.

"My name is Pete Allen," I said. "Those two guys—friends of yours?"

"No," she said. "But I know them."

"Who are they?"

"The big one's name is Albert Henderson. The other one calls himself Doctor Aterbury."

"A hell of a looking doctor," I said. "What do they do? And why do they bother you?"

"I don't know. But they follow me everywhere I go. It is very embarrassing."

"Is that all?" It all sounded pretty phony to me.

"Just about, except—you've been so nice to me—I think I had better tell you this. They knew that Lady Blue had already won that race today—before they placed their bet."

"I wondered," I said. "How? Telephone from the track?"

"No. They offered to let me in on it. I refused. They have a short-wave radio set in their car—with an accomplice at the track with a short-wave transmitter. They get the results in a minute or two before it comes over your ticker."

"Oh," I said. I had heard of that racket before, but it never had been pulled on the boss. The boss is too easy. He's a straight guy and he thinks everybody else is, too. But I decided that I was going to make Harry use the deadline bell from now on.

I looked at the girl. "What are you going to do now? Do you have a job?"

She was staring straight ahead, and I saw her jaw set stubbornly. "No," she said. "But I'm going to get one—now. I've got to."

"Come on," I said. "Break down. Tell me about it. You'll feel better. Where's your folks? What's your name?"

She smiled at me. "I'm sorry," she said. "You've been very nice. But I can't tell you that. It's—a personal matter. You can call me Rose — Rose Vaughn."

Now, I'm just a big pile of beef with a good appetite and a healthy conscience. I've knocked around a lot and I've seen all kinds of dames in all kinds of places, but I had never seen one just like this babe before. There was something about her I liked—and a lot I couldn't understand. It is part of my job to spot the phonies from the real thing, and it seemed to me that this girl had the stuff—all the way through. And yet I wasn't sure. Her clothes were good, expensive, and she wore them with a careless air as though she was used to them. And yet I knew she was broke. And I noticed that beneath her short black dress a tear in the sheer silk covering of one leg was neatly stitched together, and the high heels of her shoes were slightly run over. I noticed little things like that, and I noticed too that her make-up was just right—not too heavy; and when she smiled she showed straight even teeth. She had clear blue eyes and wore her black hair in a long curling bob. I liked her looks, all right.

"Okay, Rose," I said. "I'm just a plain guy, no frills, but if I can do anything for you, let me know."

The taxi had stopped in front of a shabby-looking brown stone building and she got out. "Thank you," she smiled. "I'll remember that."

I got out too, and we stood there on the sidewalk in the afternoon sunshine looking at each other. Suddenly she

said, "Look, if you don't have to get back, why don't you come up for a minute? I can offer you tea," she smiled. "Nothing stronger."

I had heard that people drank tea, and I figured that maybe one cup wouldn't hurt me. Anyhow there wouldn't be much doing at the club until later in the afternoon, and I admit that I had taken a shine to this girl. So I said, "Okay, thanks." And I paid the taxi driver and went in.

IT WAS a pretty crummy looking dump and a girl like her didn't have any more business living there than I had drinking tea. There was no elevator and we walked up four flights of stairs to her floor and down a stuffy hall. The floor was covered with brown carpet with worn spots in it, like an Irish setter with the mange. We came to her room, she took out a key and unlocked the door and we went in.

It wasn't much of a room. There was a bed, a couple of chairs, a dressing table and over in the corner was a sink, a small oil stove, and a cabinet for cooking utensils and dishes. Everything was clean, though, and neat. It was hot, too, and she opened a window and a faint breeze blew in. I went over to the window, and I could look straight down Eighth Avenue.

She took off her hat, said, "Sit down," and she opened the cabinet and took out cups and saucers and a small brown tea-pot. I sat down in a chair by the window and lit a cigarette. And then somebody began to pound on the door. The girl turned around.

I said, "Expecting anybody?"

She smiled ruefully. "Only the landlady."

I said, "Oh," and went over to the door and unlocked it and started to open it. But before I had it open, somebody on the other side pushed it violently back and two guys came busting in. It was Handsome Henderson and his little pal.

Henderson had a gun in his hand. The little guy turned and locked the door, put the key in the pocket of his baggy suit. Then they both stood and looked at me.

I said, "Hello, boys. Won't you come in?" And then I looked around at the girl, said, "Nice work—Miss Vaughn, or whatever your name is." But she wasn't looking at me, seemed not to have heard me. She stood perfectly still, her eyes glued to the gun in Henderson's hand. I turned again to the men. "What's on your mind, boys?"

Henderson said, "Don't act so cute. We owe you a little something." I noticed that there was a black and blue mark on his swollen jaw where I had smacked him.

"Okay," I said. "Lay down that rod and I'll be glad to oblige you. You can have Weasel Face there for a handicap."

"Shut up, you fat slob," said Henderson.

I didn't like that. I may be big, but I'm not fat—anyhow, not a fat slob. I began to judge the distance between Henderson and me and I tried to decide how much chance I'd have of kicking the gun out of his hand. Baggy Pants must have read my thoughts. He flipped his wrist and suddenly there was a knife in his hand. He stepped quickly up behind me and I felt the point of his knife coming through my coat right over my kidneys.

"Please stand still, sir," he said. "If you don't, I may be forced to make a rather hurried incision." He pressed the knife a little harder.

"My, my," I said. "A two-knife man."

Henderson stepped up close and rammed his gun in my stomach. There

was an ugly look around his mouth. I stood still. With a knife in my back and a gun against my belly there wasn't much else for me to do. Suddenly Henderson slapped me across the mouth with his left hand. Baggy Pants behind me twisted his knife a little. The point wasn't in very far, but even at that it didn't feel very good, and I could feel the back of my shirt getting wet.

THERE was a sudden movement behind me, and out of the corner of my eye I saw the girl making a dive for the door. Henderson swung away from me, grabbed her arm, and flung her back. She hit the wall and slumped down to the floor and kind of huddled there, holding her hands to her face. Her dress was pulled up and I saw a narrow strip of white flesh between the hem of her dress and the tops of her stockings. And then the digging pain in the middle of my back got sharper, and the little guy said, "Steady, sir."

Henderson turned back to me. Without warning he flicked his gun around in a vicious arc. The muzzle dragged across my cheek. My face was numb for an instant and then I felt the slow drops of blood oozing out. To hell with this, I thought. I'd taken enough from these two bums.

I lunged forward and sideways, away from the knife, and as I lunged I flung my right at Henderson's mouth. He sidestepped and my knuckles scraped against his ear. In the same instant his arm came around and the flat side of his automatic smashed against the side of my head over my ear. I went down to the carpet, and before my face hit the floor he smacked me again. The floor felt soft and restful and I remember stretching slowly out, as if I were going to sleep. As from a great distance I heard Baggy Pants giggle, a kind of a hissing sound. "Sssso nice, Albert. Sssso nice." And then a roaring blackness blotted out all sound.

WHEN I opened my eyes I was lying on the floor and I felt terrible. For a minute I had a hard time remembering where I was and what had happened. I got to my feet feeling pretty groggy, and my head hurt bad. The first thing I did was feel for my dough. It was gone—about three hundred bucks. And my watch too. They did leave me my cigarette lighter, though, and about two bucks in change in my pants pocket.

I looked around, but I didn't see any bathroom, so I picked up my hat and went out into the hall. Down at the end I saw a door marked "Men," and I went in. In the cracked and dirty mirror I looked at myself and wondered if I felt as bad as I looked, or the other way around. The cold water felt good. I washed off the blood, soaked my head in the water, and combed my hair. There was a bump as big around as a four-bit piece above my ear. I had to slant my hat on the other side of my head. I tightened my belt, pulled down my vest, and went out. When I got down to the sidewalk I was surprised to see that the afternoon was almost gone. Traffiic was thick, and people were hurrying past me. The sun was low and yellow over beyond the Empire State building. The air was cooler, though, and as I started down the street I began to feel a lot better.

About a block away I turned into a dinky bar and had two slugs of rye. I lit a cigarette then and went back to a telephone booth in the corner and called Sergeant Dan Coppus. He was working on the desk and he and I had done each other a number of good turns off and on during the past ten years.

"Listen, Dan," I said. "This is Pete.

Have you got anything on a big good-looking bird who calls himself Albert Henderson and a little dried up mugg who hangs around with him answering to the moniker of Dr. Aterbury?"

"Pete," said Dan, "I thought you had died. The missus was asking about you the other day. When you coming over to the house? How about tonight? I got plenty beer——"

"Look, Dan," I said, "I've got to get back to the place. I'll be over, but not tonight. How about those two guys? I want to know. They just beat hell out of me."

"Why didn't you say so?" asked Dan. "Where are you? I'll call you back."

I told him that I was going back to the club and that he should call me there in about twenty minutes. Then I went out and snagged a taxi. When I got back to the place everything was pretty quiet. Harry was sitting behind his desk reading the evening papers. He looked up when I walked in.

Harry said, "What in hell happened to you? You look like you been hit by a truck."

I began to tell him all about what happened and while I was talking the phone rang. It was Coppus.

"Pete," he said, "we ain't got a thing on either of those two monkeys. What other names they got?"

"Plenty, I suppose," I said. "But I don't know what they are?"

"Give me their descriptions," he said, "and where last seen. I'll broadcast it. What else did they do beside beat you up?"

I told him the story and gave him the girl's description too.

"Okay," he said. "We'll charge them with assault and battery, robbery, and carrying concealed weapons. What about the girl?"

"The girl?" I said. I had been thinking a lot about her, and I figured that I wasn't the only sucker that she had had up to her room "for tea". No wonder she hadn't accepted the hundred and twenty bucks I had offered her. That made her act all the better. "The girl?" I repeated. "That's easy. Accomplice. Aiding and abetting. Bait, lure, the worm on the hook."

Coppus laughed. "Pete," he said, "I thought you knew all the angles. You must be getting old and silly. Black hair, blue eyes, nice legs——"

"Go to hell, flatfoot," I said. "Let me know if you find out anything."

"Sure Pete. How about tonight? Bring Harry along and we'll play some pinochle."

"Not tonight," I said. "Let me know if you pick up any of them." And I hung up.

The buzzer on Harry's desk let loose. Harry took the receiver off the hook, said, "All right. Right away."

He looked up at me. "The boss is up stairs. He heard about the ruckus this afternoon. He wants to see you. Now."

"Yeah," I sighed. "I was afraid of that. Don't forget about that dead-line bell. We're using it from now on."

Harry grunted. "Never should have stopped using it."

I went up the back stairway to the boss' apartment on the second floor. When I knocked he yelled for me to come in. I could tell by the sound of his voice that he was mad. I was right. He gave me merry hell.

I SHAVED, took a shower, fixed up up my face and went back downstairs for something to eat. While I was eating at a table in the corner a guy walked in and went up to Harry and said, "Who is in charge here?"

Harry nodded at me and the guy walked over. I got up and looked him over. I guessed him to be about forty-five years old. He was well-dressed in

a gray chalk-stripe suit and a gray Homburg, and he carried a cane. He was a nice-looking guy with a smooth ruddy complexion and neat gray mustache. He wore rimless eye glasses and his hair was gray at the temples. He looked like the pictures you sometimes see in the advertisements of guys supposed to be Big Business, or the Boss behind a polished desk saying "No" to some poor bird with halitosis or B. O. He stood in front of me, smiled pleasantly and said, "Good evening," and handed me a card. The card was engraved and it said, *Mr. Preston Rowden,* and gave an address in Westchester. The name didn't mean a thing to me.

I put the card in my pocket, said, "My name's Allen. What can I do for you?"

He looked around, said, "May we talk privately, Mr. Allen?"

"Sure," I said. "Sit down."

We both sat down and he hung his cane over the edge of the table and took off his hat. His hair was beginning to thin a little. It was parted on the side, and I could see the comb marks in it, very neat. He was freshly shaven and he had a clean scrubbed and polished look about him.

"Mr. Allen," he began, "rather unusual circumstances—I might say painful and unfortunate circumstances—prompted this visit. I hope I can rely on your discretion?"

"Sure," I said, wondering what he was leading up to. "It's just between you and me."

"Thank you," he said, smiling. "I feel that you mean that. I'll put what I have to tell you quite bluntly. Maybe you can help me. Four days ago my step-daughter left home. I won't go into details as to why she left home, except to say that she is an impetuous, headstrong person and that she resented certain parental restrictions which her mother and I felt should be imposed on her for her own good. Her father has been dead for a number of years, and as is often true in such cases, her mother has found it increasingly difficult to discipline her. When her mother and I married we both hoped that perhaps with my added support we could do something with her. But" — Rowden smiled ruefully—"it didn't work out that way. She seemed to like me, but I have no more control over her than her mother has."

"So," I said, "She finally left home. You've been looking for her yourself because you don't want to call the cops because of the publicity. Right?"

He nodded. "Yes. That's about it. Only this—she didn't have much money when she left. One of the things we have tried to restrain her from is gambling. She had a passion for betting on the horses. Her mother and I both thought that the first thing she would do would be to try to make more money —she didn't have much with her when she left—the only way she knows how. That's why I am here. Your place is better known than the other places in town. I came here first. She's about five feet four, black hair, blue eyes——"

"Would she call herself Rose Vaughn?" I asked.

Rowden looked excited. "Yes—yes, she would. Vaughn was her mother's maiden name. Have you seen her? Was she in here?"

"Yeah," I said. "She's been in here every afternoon for the last four days."

"Well," he said. "This is certainly luck. Then you think she'll probably be in here again?"

"No," I said. "I don't think she will."

He looked startled. "You don't? Why not?"

I TOLD him, then, all I knew about Rose Vaughn, and what had hap-

pened that afternoon. Before I had finished telling him he began to frown and drum on the table top with his manicured fingers. He took out a thin silver cigarette case, lit a cigarette, put the case back in his pocket, took it out again and offered it to me. "I'm sorry," he said. "Smoke?"

I took one, said, "Thanks. Do you know anything about this Henderson or Aterbury?"

"Yes," he said. "I know Henderson. I don't like him. He has been out to the house several times. I warned him to stay away. He may have been part of the reason she went away."

"A friend of hers?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm sorry to say."

"She didn't act very friendly towards him," I said. "Was that part of her act, too."

"I don't like to believe it," he said, "but I'm afraid it was. She is incorrigible. If it weren't for her mother, I would be inclined to wash my hands of the whole affair."

I was thinking, trying to figure out the set-up. A lot of things didn't tie in. Did they pick on me especially for their little game, or did I just happen to be the one who fell for it? But if the girl was in with Henderson and Aterbury, why did she tell me about their short-wave radio racket? To get further into my confidence, to put me off guard because she knew that they couldn't work their game in the boss's place again anyway?

But this Rowden sure looked worried, and I didn't envy him the spot he was in. I could picture his wife nagging at him and driving him to look for her no-good daughter, when he was convinced that she wasn't worth the effort. After all, she wasn't his daughter but it kind of put him on the spot. I felt a little sorry for him but it was nothing to me, although I would have liked to have had my dough and watch back. And I would have liked to have gotten a crack at Henderson and his weasel-faced pal. When I thought about them I began to burn. The tape on my face and the bump over my ear reminded me of them—and the girl. I don't go in for beating women but I felt as though I would enjoy slapping her a few times where it would do the most good.

"Well, Mr. Rowden," I said, "I guess it's out of your hands. I've already told the cops. They are looking for your step-daughter and her two pals right now."

He looked at me, startled. "You notified the police? You shouldn't have done that. What right have you——?"

"Listen," I said. "They beat me up, took my watch and three hundred bucks."

He leaned back in his chair, began drumming on the table again. "Yes, yes, of course," he said. "I'm sorry. You were within your rights. Only it puts me in a rather awkward position. Mrs. Rowden, you know——"

THE telephone on Harry's desk rang. Harry answered it, said, "Just a minute," and called across the room to me. "Pete. It's for you."

I went over, picked up the phone. It was Dan Coppus. "Pete," he said, "we got the girl."

I looked over at Rowden, said into the mouthpiece. "Nice going. Where did you pick her up?" Rowden got to his feet, picked up his hat and cane, and kept looking at me.

"At her room, the place where you said they rolled you. She came back there about an hour ago. I had a man watching the place. We got her down here at the station."

"Okay," I said. "We'll be right down."

"Who's 'we'?"

"Me and her step-dad," I said, and hung up.

Rowden walked up to me. I said, "The cops have got her. I'll have to go along with you to get her out."

Rowden said, "I'm not going."

I looked at him, surprised. "You want to take her home, don't you?"

"Yes, of course. But I don't want to appear at the police station. You know—reporters, publicity. That is one thing Mrs. Rowden and I have been trying to avoid in this matter."

"Now look," I said. "She is your problem, not mine. All I want is my watch and my three hundred bucks. What am I supposed to do with her?"

"Withdraw your charges. Get her out. Bring her over to her room and I will meet you there. I think that will be better. I will reimburse you for your trouble and your loss."

I shrugged. "Okay. If that's the way you want it."

He asked, "What is the address of the place where she is staying?"

I told him, and he said he would meet me there. He went out and I went upstairs and got out my old .38. I didn't think I would need it, but I wasn't going back into that neighborhood again without it. When I went back downstairs the evening trade was just starting to come in and I went over to Harry and told him to take care of things until I got back.

He said, "The boss won't like it."

"I'll be right back," I said. "If he wants me, tell him I went down to the corner for an ice cream soda." I went outside, got hold of a taxi and went over to the station.

When I went in, Dan grinned at me. "I don't blame you, Pete," he said. "She's sure a swell looker."

"Cut it out," I said. "Where is she?"

Dan got up and yelled at somebody in another room and in a couple of minutes they brought her out. She didn't look very good. Her eyes looked tired and she didn't have any make-up on. She had combed her hair, though, and her clothes were neat.

I said, "Hello, Rose."

She looked at me, not smiling. She said, "I'm sorry for what happened this afternoon."

"Sure, sure," I said. "Where's my watch and money?"

"They have it. I couldn't stop them."

"Where are they now?"

She shrugged her shoulders slightly, "I don't know." Her voice sounded tired. "After they left this afternoon, I went out. When I came back, you were gone."

"I should have stuck around," I said. "I see that. What did you go out for?"

A little color came into her pale cheeks. "You were hurt. I walked to a drug store to get some gauze and things."

"Well, well," I said. "That was real nice of you. What was your cut out of my three hundred bucks?"

She looked at me with steady eyes. "I told you that I didn't have anything to do with that."

"All right," I said. "Okay. Come on. I'll take you home." I turned to Dan. He had been an interested listener to our conversation. "It's all right. I'll take care of her."

"I'll bet," Dan said grinning. "How about her two pals?"

"Keep on looking. And let me know as soon as you pick them up."

Dan shrugged. "You're the doctor. And if it ain't too much trouble, stop around some time and tell me what this is all about."

THE girl was watching me, but she didn't say anything. I guess she couldn't figure it out, either, my springing her that way. But she went outside

with me. Her room wasn't very far from the station, so we walked. And besides, I thought that if we walked it would give her more time to talk to me — if there was anything she wanted to tell me. But she didn't say much, and neither did I. I figured if I told her about Rowden waiting for her she wouldn't want to go. And anyhow, I told myself, all I wanted was to get her off my hands and get my dough and watch back.

When we were almost to her building she said suddenly: "You don't believe me, do you?"

I said, "No," and guided her into the building and up the stairs. I kept looking around but I didn't see anything of Rowden. I figured that maybe he was waiting up in the hall. But when we got up there he wasn't there, either. She unlocked her door, opened it and stood looking at me. "Thank you," she said, "For bringing me home. I don't know why you are doing this for me—after what happened—but I'm very grateful." She looked down at the ragged carpet. "And I hope you get your money back."

"I hope so, too," I said, making talk and wondering where in hell Rowden was. He had plenty of time to get there. I didn't want to leave her alone —I felt kind of responsible for her—and yet I didn't know exactly how to work it so that I could stay there until Rowden came. So I said, "How about giving me that tea that I didn't get this afternoon?"

She looked up quickly at me, and I knew that I had said the wrong thing. And I began to wonder about her again. For a second she stood there in the doorway with the dark room behind her, looking at me. Then she pushed the door open wider, said, "Of course. Come in." Her voice was suddenly flat, toneless. She pressed the light switch beside the door. The lights came on and she walked into the room. I followed her. I didn't touch the door, but I heard it shut behind me. Too late I whirled around.

Henderson and Aterbury stood in front of the closed door, Aterbury a little behind Henderson. Aterbury was grinning, showing his mouthful of false teeth. Henderson was grinning, too. But it wasn't a nice grin. He had a big black Colt .45 in his hand. And it was pointing straight at my belly.

I had my .38 in my inside coat pocket. I could feel its weight against my chest, and my fingers itched to feel it in my hand. But I didn't have a chance. Henderson had me covered, and he wasn't three feet away. For a second the three of us just stood there looking at each other.

And then Henderson said, nasty, "Didn't you get enough this afternoon?"

Aterbury giggled.

IGNORING them, I turned my head and looked at the girl. She was standing perfectly still, her face white. "Maybe I'm dumb," I said. "Do these punks *live* here?"

"I can't help it," she said, and there was a kind of desperation in her voice. "I can't help any of this. I didn't know that they were here—really, I didn't. I don't know how they got in —maybe the fire escape——"

"Maybe," I grunted. And then all of a sudden I believed her. There was something about her eyes, the sound of her voice. I grinned at her then. "Okay, girlie. Take it easy."

I looked around at Henderson. "What's the play?" I said.

Henderson said, "Shut up, you fat slob," and he waved his gun at the girl. "All right, sweetheart, we're all through fooling. Get going." He mo-

tioned towards the door.

She looked at me. Her eyes were dark with fear. Whatever Henderson's game was, he meant business. And the girl knew it. She took a step backwards. "No," she said. "I'm not going anywhere. Not with you."

Henderson shifted his gun to his left hand, kept the muzzle pointed at me, and stepped swiftly over to the girl. He grabbed her arm, jerked it. "Come on, sweetheart. We ain't got all night."

I said, "Leave her alone. You heard what she said. She's not going."

Henderson looked at me, said, "Who rattled your chain?" He jerked his head at Aterbury by the door. "Doc, take care of Fatty, here. And watch him this time."

Aterbury slithered up behind me and I saw the gleam of the knife in his hand. He pressed the point against my kidneys again, not easy, and he giggled, "Stand still, sir. My hand is not too steady tonight."

Henderson jerked the girl towards the door. She tried to pull away from him. He let go of her arm and slapped her hard across the mouth. She stumbled back against the wall, her head down, her eyes tight shut. Her lower lip began to bleed. Henderson took a quick step towards her and there was a kind of a vicious look of pleasure on his face. He slapped her again and her head banged up against the wall. "Don't," she moaned. "I'll go."

Maybe I'm old-fashioned but I don't like to see a girl—any girl—treated like that. And anyhow I was tired of standing still for the slimey little punk behind me. Him and his knife! I twisted sideways away from him, and as I twisted I grabbed for the .38 in my inside coat pocket. But Aterbury darted right after me, his knife out in front of him. He handled it like a sword, low, in front of him. He came right on in, showing his too-even teeth and the fake pink of his gums. I swung up a leg and kicked him in the belly, hard, and his mouth clicked shut and he went backwards. I had my .38 in my hand then, and as Henderson whirled around, snarling, I brought it up, my finger tight on the trigger. But I didn't dare shoot. The girl was right behind him.

The three of us stood there for a split second, all action suspended, like a lobby-still at a movie. Henderson had his gun out in front of him, but he didn't shoot. I found out why.

A crisp voice behind me said, "Drop it, Allen."

I jerked my head around. Mr. Preston Rowden stood in the doorway, Homburg, cane, and all. He had a stubby little blue steel revolver in his hand. He said again, "Drop that gun, Allen."

"Like hell," I said. "What's the idea, Rowden?"

Behind me I heard the girl gasp, "You!" and her voice sounded hard and unnatural. And then she gave a little scream and in almost the same instant something heavy and hard slammed me on the back of the head and the floor came rushing up to meet me. Close beside me I heard Aterbury's sickening giggle, and then I stopped hearing anything at all. For the second time that day I was out cold.

WHEN I opened my eyes again it was dark. Dark all around me. And very quiet. My head hurt like hell, and I closed my eyes again to see if the pain would go away. It didn't. I opened them again and I began to remember things. I tried to move and I found out I couldn't. They had me trussed up good, both hands and feet, with my arms behind me. I raised my

head, tried to make out where I was. I was lying on a bare board floor and the planks were very hard. Directly in front of me was a window. Through the window I could see the night sky, and over beyond a dark blotch of trees on a hillside I saw the reflection of the lights of some town. I stretched out again and tried to figure out what kind of a mess I had gotten myself into.

From somewhere near me a low voice said, "Mr. Allen."

I recognized the voice of the girl. I turned my head and I could barely make out her form across the room lying close to the wall. She appeared to be in the same fix I was.

"Call me Pete," I said, low. I talked quiet because she had. "I guess the situation is informal enough."

"Are you all right?" she whispered.

"Yeah," I said. "I guess so. How about you?"

"Yes," she replied. "Only I can't move."

"What is this?" I asked. "A snatch, or what?"

"Listen," she said. "I'll have to talk fast. They carried you down the fire escape from my room and the three of them brought us out here. Rowden and Henderson have gone away, but Aterbury is somewhere around. We are in a deserted farm house somewhere in Westchester, not very far off the Post Road. Rowden is my step-father——"

"Yeah," I said. "I knew that. He is the reason I sprung you out of the jug tonight."

"Yes," she said. "I know that now. I know a lot of things now. They may be back any minute. . . ."

"I don't get it," I said, "but the first thing we got to do is get out of here."

I tried to get to my feet, but with my hands tied behind me and my feet lashed together I couldn't make it. So then I started to roll. I managed to make it over to the girl's side, but when I got there I had to lay still a minute. My head was pounding and I felt pretty weak. I turned on my side and looked at the girl. The moon had come up and she lay there in the pale light, her eyes bright, watching me. Her dress was torn down one round shoulder and I saw the white gleam of her legs where her dress had been worked halfway to her waist. She was tied hand and foot, the same as I was, and her sheer stockings were twisted and torn by the cords around her slim ankles. My eyes were on a level with hers. I felt pretty tough. There was a roaring in my head, and I shut my eyes, but the roaring didn't stop.

I heard her say, "They are coming back. We've *got* to get out of here." Her voice sounded far away.

"Okay," I muttered. "I'll figure out something." I didn't know what I'd figure out. All I wanted to do right then was to close my eyes and relax and wait for my head to stop hurting.

The girl whispered, "I want you to know this. My mother loves him—Rowden, I mean—I don't know why. Henderson and Aterbury are friends of his; they came to our house soon after Rowden married my mother. Rowden could fool my mother but he couldn't fool me. Things at home became unbearable. And then Rowden began to —make passes at me. I couldn't tell my mother; it would break her heart. So I left. Rowden had Henderson and Aterbury keep track of me. I couldn't get rid of them. And then, after I left, Rowden got this idea of paying Henderson and Aterbury to kidnap me—and keep the money that Mother would pay for my release for himself. He intended to keep out of it entirely. That is why he came to see you, to establish an alibi for himself. But you and the police spoiled his plans, and he was forced

to show himself tonight when you made that break in my room. He had tipped off Henderson and Aterbury that you were bringing me back there. He was hiding in the hall."

I OPENED my eyes and looked at her. My head felt a little better. "And now Rowden is in up to his neck," I said. "And he can't back out. If he tried to, Henderson and Aterbury would probably blackmail him."

"That's it," she said. "They were arguing about it. Henderson wants an equal share of the money—or else he will expose Rowden to Mother."

"Very pretty," I said. And then suddenly the whole nasty set-up was very clear to me and I began to sweat. I think the girl must have known it all along—ever since Rowden had showed himself at her room. Rowden could never go back to his easy living with the girl's mother now—not as long as the girl was alive. And it wasn't only the girl. *I* was in on this too, and I could just about picture what was going to happen to me when Rowden and Henderson got back. And it wasn't a pretty picture. I wasn't going to lay there and wait for Rowden to come back and put a slug in my ear—not if I could help it.

"Where's Aterbury?" I said.

"Outside, somewhere. He may be listening now."

"Never mind," I whispered. "Turn over. I'm going to try and unite you."

She turned over on her side with her back to me and I wriggled around so that I could get my teeth at the knots in the heavy cord around her wrists. But it was no use. The knots were too small and too tight. I bit and chewed and I damn near broke off a couple of teeth but I couldn't even loosen the cord. I gave up finally and tried to think of something. She turned over so that she faced me again. "What are we going to do?" she whispered.

"I don't know," I said. "Whatever it is, it's got to be quick."

And then I had an idea. It might work, and it might not, but it was a chance worth trying.

"I said, "Listen. I've got a cigarette lighter in my right hand coat pocket. If you can get it, see what you can do about burning the rope on my wrists."

She nodded silently and squirmed around until her back was to me, and even with her hands tied behind her she managed to get into my pocket and get hold of the lighter. She got it out and I heard her clicking it, trying to light it. She dropped it on the floor a couple of times, and suddenly she had it lit. The tiny flame cast faint shadows on the wall and I hoped that Aterbury, wherever he was, wouldn't notice. I twisted around and tried to get my hands into position so that she could apply the flame to the rope around my wrist.

It was pretty awkward work. I couldn't see what I was doing, and neither could she. The flame hit my hands, and then my wrists before I could smell the rope burning. I tried to hold the rope over the flame, but when I managed to hit it, my wrist burnt as much as the rope. It hurt, sure, but I held on as long as I could. I could smell the scorched strands of rope, and there was another smell—the grease frying out of my hide. I stood it as long as I could, and when I finally pulled my hands away I could feel the sweat all over me and I discovered that I was biting the hell out of my lower lip. I could taste the blood.

The girl flicked the flame off. I jerked at the ropes, tried to pull my wrists apart. But it was no go. The rope wasn't burning enough. I took a deep breath, said, "All right, girlie. Give me a light."

SHE flicked the flame on again, and in the faint illumination I saw a black shadow fall across our bodies. The girl saw it too. I heard her suck in her breath, and the flame suddenly went out. I rolled over on my back, looked at the doorway.

A man's dark figure stood silhouetted there against the night sky. The figure moved slowly into the room and stood in the path of moonlight which streamed through the window, and I saw the ugly wink of steel in his hand. And then I heard Aterbury's silly giggle.

"Well, well," he said. "What is going on in here?" He stepped up to us, lit a match, and peered at the cords which bound us. Satisfied, he stood up, and I heard his false teeth click. "Is it—ah—necessary for you two to be so close together?" he asked, giggling. He wagged a forefinger. "I don't approve, you know. I think I had better stay right here and chaperon you."

I struggled to a sitting position. "Listen——" I began, but before I could say more he lifted his foot and kicked me in the face and my head hit the floor. I lay there a minute, a red haze of hate covering my brain. I heard the girl grate through her teeth at Aterbury: "You dirty coward."

My face hurt, and I could feel the blood beginning to ooze out of a gash in my chin. I would have given an awful lot to have gotten my hands on Aterbury's scrawny neck at that moment. But I said, "You play rough, but it's the hot seat for you if you play around here much longer." And I let that sink in.

For a second Aterbury didn't say anything. I saw his eyes flash in the moonlight as he shot a glance out the window. He giggled, then, but it was a kind of a nervous giggle.

I began to talk fast, but I was thinking faster. "Listen, sap. Rowden came to me tonight and told me the whole set-up, offered to cut me in but I didn't want any part of it. He and Henderson are collecting the dough right now—*and they won't be back.* They are going to leave you here for the cops to find, and keep the dough—all of it. How long have they been gone? Too long, haven't they? The cops will be here any minute and it won't do you any good to squeal on them because after Rowden showed his hand tonight he has to take it on the lam anyway. And you take the rap."

In the moonlight I could see Aterbery's shifty eyes flicking back and forth from me to the girl and he kept switching his knife from one hand to the other. "Lies," he said, and his voice was almost a hiss. "All lies. A trick. They'll be back."

I figured that he was right, and that they would be back—pretty quick. And then the game would be up.

The girl spoke up. "That's right, Dr. Aterbury. Cut us loose and go home with us and we'll see that the police won't bother you. And I'm sure that Mother will make it worth your while. Only hurry."

I had to give the girl credit. She was using her head, all right. I thought I could scare him, but she used the only language that rats like Aterbury can understand—money.

Aterbury hesitated a second. Then he said, "How much?" His voice was hoarse, and for once he wasn't giggling. I could see his bright eyes watching the girl.

She said, "Anything—whatever you want."

"Ten thousand dollars?" asked Aterbury.

"Yes," she said. "Ten thousand dollars."

There was silence for a second. Then Aterbury laughed. "Oh, no," he said.

"What proof have I that I can trust you?"

I WAS afraid that he would ask that, but I had an answer ready for him. "I'll stay here. Take the girl and get your money."

The girl said, "No, Pete. I can't let you do that." It was the first time she had ever called me by my first name. I kind of liked to hear her say it.

"Never mind," I said. "It'll be all right."

Aterbury wasn't so dumb. I think he realized that we were trying to pull a fast one, but the ten thousand bucks all for himself looked pretty good to him. He stood trembling in an agony of indecision. He turned quickly to the window, shot a quick glance both to the right and left. I felt the girl's hand touch mine. She was pressing something into my palm. It was my lighter. She had kept it hidden in her fist since Aterbury had come in.

Aterbury turned quickly from the window. He had made up his mind. He jumped to the girl's side. He was breathing hard. Feverishly he cut the rope which bound her hands and feet. I guess he was plenty scared and now that he had made up his mind he wanted to get the hell out of there. While he was cutting the girl loose he was careful to stay clear of me. When she was free she got to her feet and Aterbury almost dragged her to the door. She hung on to the door jamb a second looking at me. "I'll be back," she said, "as fast as I can."

"Okay," I said, and I hoped that I would still be alive to see her when she did come back.

And then Aterbury pulled her away and I heard them cross the porch and go down the steps. Silence settled down. I got to work with the lighter, but I couldn't do much good. I pretty near sprained a wrist trying to get the flame into position, and when I finally did get it so that I could smell the rope burning instead of my hide, the fluid gave out. When I discovered that the wick was no longer burning, I just lay there a minute thinking things over.

I figured that it would take at least an hour for the girl to go home and get back to me, and a lot of things could happen in that hour. When they had been gone about ten minutes I had another idea and I cussed myself for a fool for not thinking of it sooner. I rolled over to the window, got up on my knees, and began to drag the rope on my wrists against the rough wooden edge of the window sill. Almost immediately I could tell that the rope strands were getting ragged with the friction. I rubbed harder and I was sweating and breathing hard when the first strand let loose. It was fairly easy from then on, and in a couple of minutes I had my hands free. I began to rub my wrists to bring back circulation and I saw my hands in the moonlight. They were not a pretty sight. The rope had rubbed my wrists raw and blood was running into open blisters made by the lighter. I bent over to untie the rope around my ankles. And then I heard a car coming up the road, fast. Rowden and Henderson were coming back at last.

I WORKED harder on the knots, but they were tied tight, and tangled. I tugged and pulled and tore loose a fingernail but I couldn't get the rope even loosened. I shot a quick glance out the window. The car was close. I could see the headlights bouncing over the rutty mud road. It turned into the yard in front of the house and stopped. I heard a door slam, and then the voice of Rowden. "I'll wait here. Do it quick."

"Like hell," I heard Henderson say.

"You're in this too. Come on."

Rowden's answer was lost in the slamming of the car door, and then I saw the two of them walking across the yard toward the house, Henderson in front.

I gave up trying to untie my feet and I dragged myself along the floor to the door. I got to my feet and braced myself flat against the wall beside the door. It was hard to stand with my feet tied together. I heard Henderson yell, "Doc! Where the hell are you?" I heard him come up the steps and cross the rickety porch. I braced myself beside the door and cocked my right fist.

Henderson came in first. He said, "Doc, damn you——" and then I let him have it with all I had. I felt his jaw crunch against my knuckles like a bag of marbles and he went sideways to his knees, teetered there a second, and then went over on his face and lay still.

But the effort had thrown me off balance, and my hobbled legs refused to hold me up. I stumbled halfway across the doorway, tried to hang on to the door jamb.

Rowden, coming up the steps of the porch, saw me there. He stopped suddenly and I heard him blurt out, "Allen!" I tried to scramble back inside the door, but he was too fast for me. His gun came out and I saw the orange flash of flame and there was a deafening blasting roar in my ears. Wood splintered beside me, and Rowden's gun spat flame again. There was a sudden jolting blow in my side, low down, and my face hit the planks of the porch. It didn't hurt, but when I grabbed my side with my hand I could feel the warm blood running through my fingers.

I saw Rowden turn and run for the car. I reached out an arm to the motionless form of Henderson and my groping hand found what I was looking for—his shoulder holster. I slipped out Henderson's automatic and dragged myself on my stomach across the doorway. Rowden had the car started and was turning it around in the road, the gears clashing. He gave it the gun and it bounced down the road in second gear, gaining speed with every second. I lay on my stomach, my gun arm stretched out, and aimed carefully. I squeezed the trigger and Henderson's big automatic jumped viciously in my hand. I kept squeezing the trigger until the gun stopped jumping. The car weaved drunkenly in the ruts of the road, and swerved suddenly for the ditch. I saw it hit the ditch and bounce high. In the moonlight I saw the flash of the polished body as it rolled over twice in the field beyond. Everything was still then. I could see the car, a dully gleaming mass of metal, with its four wheels turning slowly and pointing straight up to the sky.

And then I heard another car coming up the road and I saw the lights. It was coming fast, too. I didn't think it was the girl because she hadn't been gone long enough. But I didn't care much who it was. My head seemed to be floating somewhere above my shoulders and there was a burning pain beginning to throb in my side. Something wet and dark was spreading in a widening puddle from beneath me and dripping down through the loose planks of the porch. I just lay there and dully watched the car approach.

It was the girl though. I saw her jump out of the car and I heard the sob in her voice as she ran up to the porch.

"Pete, Pete—what have they done to you. . . ?"

IT WAS all pretty hazy after that. I remember that two cops climbed out of the car and followed the girl up

to the porch. They picked me up and laid me on the back seat of the squad car and the next time I knew anything for sure it was the following afternoon and I was in a hospital bed. The first person I saw was the girl. She stood by the bed looking down at me. Behind her was Dan Coppus and the boss.

The girl said, "Pete—how to you feel?"

I grinned up at her and said, "Fine." It seems that the sawbones had got the slug out of me, and I wasn't so bad hit. A sour-looking nurse came in and said that I ought to go back to sleep, but I wanted to hear the story. Dan told it to me.

When the girl and Aterbury got to the main road they went into a filling station to call a cab. While they were there two cops in a squad car spotted Aterbury from the description I had given Dan that afternoon. Aterbury got scared and rattled. He pulled a rod and started to sling lead at the cops. They opened up on him, of course, and he died hanging on to a gasoline pump. The girl told the cops the story and the three of them highballed back to the shack where I was.

In the meantime Rowden had gotten the dough from his wife—he showed her a fake note saying that Rose was being held for $50,000, and that he, Rowden, was to deliver it in person. She must have trusted him all right, because she gave him the dough without a squawk and Rowden rejoined Henderson who was waiting outside. The two of them went back to the shack to pick up Aterbury and, I suppose, to give me and the girl the business. Rowden probably intended to keep on living with the girl's mother and he couldn't have us hanging around to squeal on him.

They found Rowden dead in the wrecked car. Henderson confessed all of this stuff the same night but he insisted that he and Rowden and Aterbury were going to take it on the lam after they got the money, and that they had no intentions in the world of harming a hair on the head of either the girl or me! Henderson confessed, too, that Rowden got the idea of kidnapping the girl after she left home. He was paying Henderson and Aterbury to tail her.

When Dan finished telling me, he said, "But the hell with that. How soon you going to get out of here? When you coming over to the house? I still got that beer."

"I'll be over," I said. "Can I bring a friend?"

Dan looked at Rose and I saw him wink. "Sure, Pete," he said.

The boss butted in then. I could tell by the way he had been fidgeting around waiting for the rest of them to get through talking that he was mad. I was right. He gave me hell.

ONE WAR SHORTAGE THAT IS A BLESSING

AS A RULE any news of a war shortage only makes us grit our teeth and work harder for victory. But now we learn of a shortage brought on by the war which is really good news.

The war shortage is narcotics and because of it many addicts have been forced to take cures to rid themselves of this terrible habit, according to the U. S. Bureau of Narcotics. The shortage is the result of more effective control measures used by the Bureau as well as the shortage of shipping facilities. Today raw opium sells at $600 per pound; morphine at $2.75 a grain.

When underworld sources of narcotics are denied them, addicts resort to unscrupulous physicians and druggists who illegally sell them the drugs. Many of these have been apprehended by the Bureau, which wants it known that doctors and druggists have done much to reduce drug addiction by cooperation with the Bureau.

Not only does the Bureau of Narcotics help to protect the health and safety of American citizens, but it has been found to pay its own way. The income to the government through the enforcement of narcotic laws in 1942 was almost $1,500,000, more than the administration cost.

» » DETECTIVE FACTS « «

By A. MORRIS

MANY a "pistol-packin' mama" couldn't hold a candle to our policemen. To prove their skill in hitting a "bull's eye," more than 100 police marksmen took part in the matches recently held in Chicago by the American Pistol Association. Seven of the matches included the use of .22, .38 and .45 caliber pistols, but the outstanding feature was the match consisting of four-man teams shooting at live chickens, the contestants being allowed to select their own foursomes. The entire event was open to the public and provided a thrill for our more skeptical citizens.

* * *

IN A RECENT burglary in St. Louis, the thief made away with approximately $5,500.00 worth of rings, watches and other valuables, leaving behind a dazzling array of jewelry valued at $25,000.00—the kind that women of all ages gaze at appreciatively or wistfully, as the case may be, through the glass of show windows. Not the sort of behavior for a truly conscientious and ambitious thief, but perhaps this one didn't wish to impress people as being too gluttonous!

* * *

THE Netherlands Government has issued a statement announcing its decision to suppress completely opium smoking in the Netherlands East Indies after the liberation of the islands. The text of the statement follows:

"The Royal Netherlands Government, having considered its attitude with regard to the opium smoking habit in certain parts of the N.E.I. after the liberation of these parts from enemy occupation, has decided to take all necessary measures for the discontinuance of that habit and for the complete suppression of the use of opium for smoking in the whole area of the N.E.I. These measures will include the abolition of the opium monopoly.

"The decision is based on the following consideration. In certain parts of the N.E.I. opium smoking is still authorized in conformity with the rules laid down in the agreement signed in Geneva on February 11, 1925, purporting to bring about the gradual, effective suppression of the manufacture of, the internal trade in and the use of prepared opium as provided for in chapter two of the International Opium Convention concluded at The Hague on January 23, 1912. As a state signatory to the protocol annexed to the agreement of February 11, 1925, the Netherlands undertook to strengthen the measures already taken in accordance with Article Six of The Hague Opium Convention of 1912 and to take any further measures which might be necessary in order to reduce the consumption of prepared opium in the territories under their authority so that such use might be completely suppressed within a period of not more than 15 years from the date on which a commission, to be appointed by the Council of the League of Nations, would decide that the poppy growing countries had insured effective measures to prevent the exportation of raw opium from their territories from constituting a serious obstacle to the reduction of consumption in countries where the use of prepared opium was still temporarily authorized.

"For many years past the Netherlands Indies opium monopoly had endeavored to restrict the use of opium as much as possible in order to pave the way for total prohibition as the ultimate aim of the Netherlands Government's opium policy. Encouraging results had been reached and consumption was steadily decreasing."

* * *

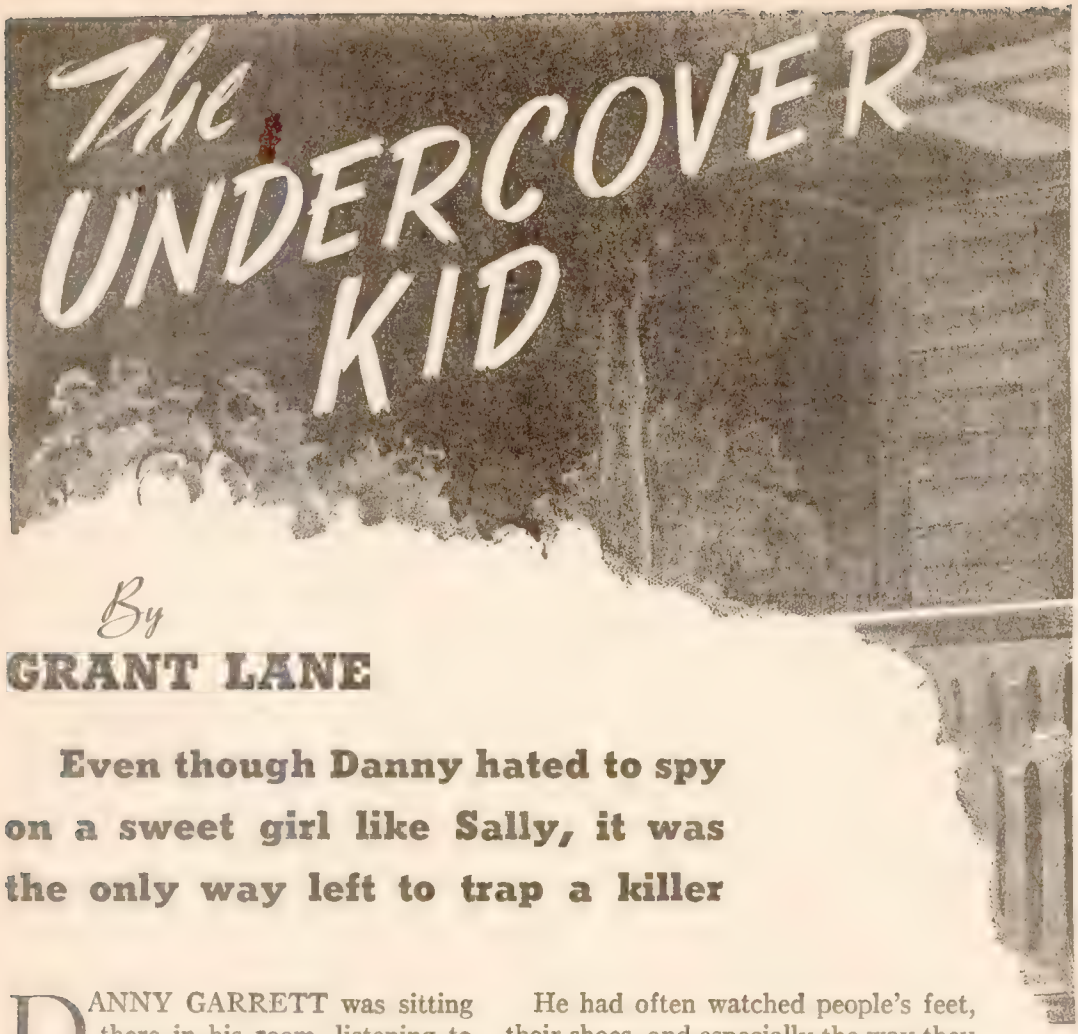
IMAGINE the surprise of the officials of the Crescent City Rifle and Pistol Club, New Orleans, when as a result of announcing a class in the handling of army style rifles for the training of home defense and state guard men and young men under draft age, several women made an appearance, anxious and eager to sign up. In spite of Instructor Thomas L. Hollis' belief that after struggling with the heavy bolt-action weapons, the most persistent amazon would falter, the women did so well that he was pleased to make them a part of the group.

* * *

PITTSBURGH police now find themselves in the unusual role of assistants to the proverbial stork. Since present war conditions have taken their toll on so many cars and hospital ambulances, all police ambulances have received orders to harken to the call of emergency maternity cases for the purpose of conveying expectant mothers to the respective hospitals. For their services, the Pittsburgh police at least deserve to be made godfathers!

* * *

THAT the manpower shortage is acute is evidenced by the fact that our juries are becoming more and more feminine. While up to now juries have been composed of a percentage of women up to a 50-50 limit, the increasing inability of summoned men to appear because of military service, essential occupations, etc., makes it apparent that the impressing row of stern male faces will soon be transformed into an impressing array of feminine hats. Even the jury quarters are undergoing feminization. But woe be to the poor defendant if the women decide to exercise their self-assumed prerogative of changing their minds!



By
GRANT LANE

Even though Danny hated to spy on a sweet girl like Sally, it was the only way left to trap a killer

DANNY GARRETT was sitting there in his room, listening to a new radio mystery show called *Midnight,* when he heard footsteps mounting the stairs. He could have told you right away who was coming up the stairs of his rooming house: Mike Ryan and Slug O'Donnel, his two headquarters' detective friends.

The kid, in his youthful and spectacular career as an associate of those headquarters men, had made quite a study of the sounds of people walking. It was only natural, because it was only until quite recently that he had been just another kid shining shoes on the sidewalks of New York. Now he was known as the Shoe-shine Kid Detective.

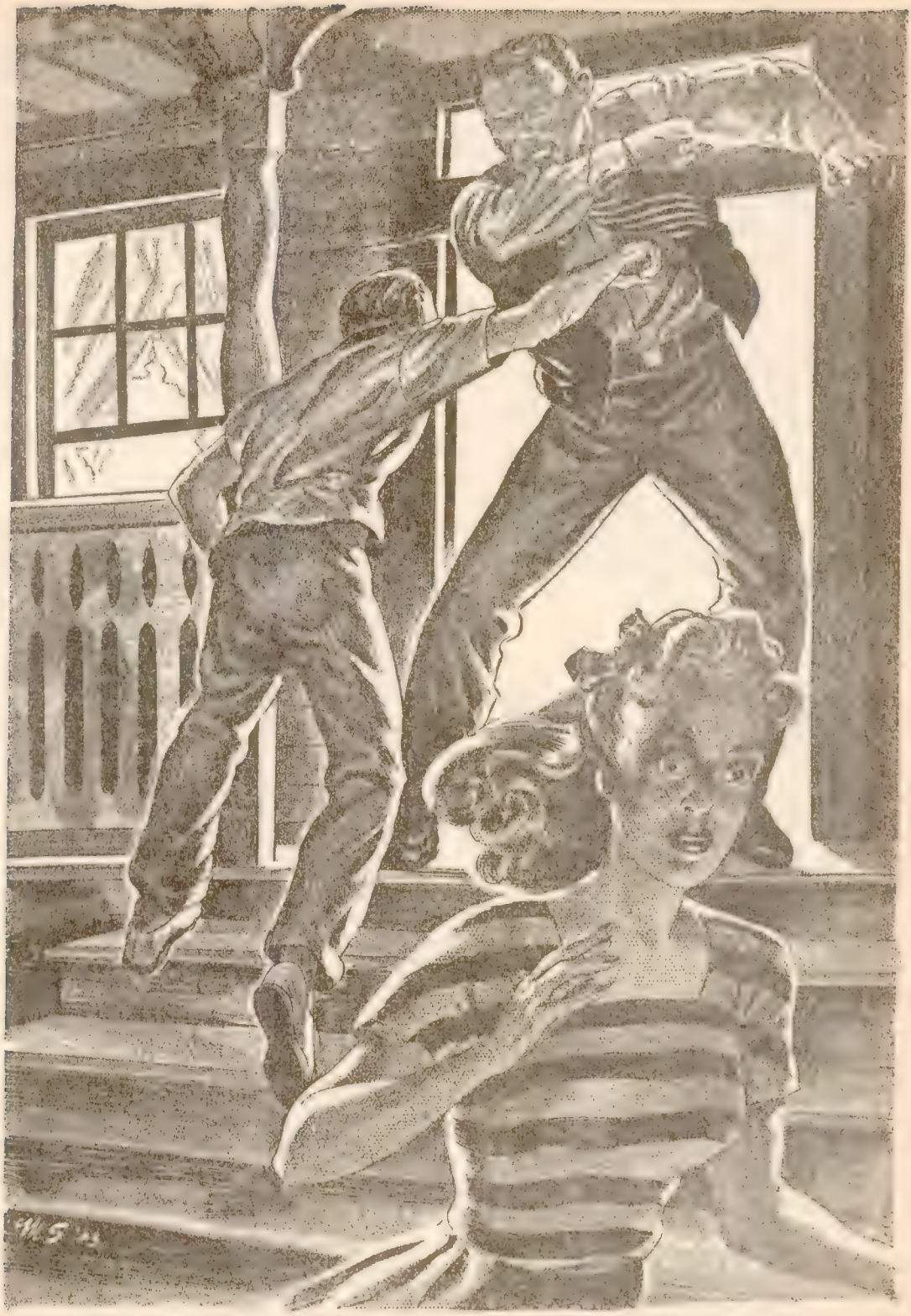
He had often watched people's feet, their shoes, and especially the way they walked.

Take Mike Ryan, for instance, the way he was coming up the stairs. Plodding, stolid . . ,*thump, thump, thump* . . . why, you could have pictured him as a detective without even *seeing* him.

Slug's footsteps were lighter and quicker. That was like Slug O'Donnel, who was a tall, thin guy as skinny as a straw. A quick, restless type.

Danny turned down the radio, waited until the footsteps had barely paused outside his door, then called, "Come in, you two."

Mike Ryan's big hulk was first through the opening doorway. A derby



Danny ducked under the swinging fist and threw his Sunday punch

was pushed to the back of his head and he was chewing on a black cigar. He was puffing just a trifle, too.

"Hello, Danny," said Mike. "How's it?"

Danny said, "You're eating too much again, Mike, you're getting fat."

Behind Ryan, skinny Slug O'Donnel grinned and said, "You're not kiddin'!" He frowned at Danny. "How'd you know it was us?"

"I could tell," Danny said. Ryan had parked himself on the edge of the bed, and Slug had slumped into the one arm chair, his long, thin body bending at angles like a folding clothes-dryer. The kid's bright blue eyes slid to the alarm clock on the dresser. It was after ten o'clock, and he wondered what brought his detective friends up here at this hour of the night.

"How come?" he asked.

"How come what?" said Slug.

"Dropping up here at this hour?"

"Oh." Ryan took the unlighted cigar out of his mouth, studied it, reached for a pad of matches. "Just thought we'd drop around, Danny"

Danny thought, any other night they'd be down at headquarters playing pinochle. There was something up, he could tell.

He said, "Don't look like two guys trying to be palsy-walsy. What's on your minds?"

"Well," murmured Slug O'Donnel, "we were wonderin' about tomorrow night. You were going to that hockey game at the Garden, weren't you?"

THE kid's face brightened. Every year one of his old customers—a banker downtown—gave him a ticket to this game, the lead game of the season, and Danny had been looking forward to it for weeks. "Sure!" he said quickly. "I've got a ticket——" He paused, his blue eyes clouding.

He knew from the expression on Mike Ryan's heavy Irish face that something was coming.

"You see, kid," started Ryan, "we've got a little job, a tough assignment, sort of. We need your help."

Slug added "Yeah. It's got to be handled right away, too."

"What?" asked Danny.

"We're trying to locate a guy," said Mike Ryan.

Danny looked at them. He frowned. Then he said, "So do you have to work nights in order to find a person? Why did you ask me about tomorrow night? Nothing in the world is going to make me miss that hockey——"

"This guy we want is a murderer," interrupted Mike Ryan.

"More than that!" put in Slug. "A cop killer. Remember Tommy Shevlin from the D.A.'s office, kid?"

Danny nodded, his eyes clouding. Tommy Shevlin had once been a headquarters man. Recently he had transferred over to the D.A.'s office as a special investigator. He was a long-standing personal friend of Mike Ryan's.

Answering the question in Danny's eyes, Mike said grimly, "Tommy Shevlin was on a case, trailing a guy. Tommy found him. And then we found Tommy—murdered!"

Danny stood up. Though not yet quite fourteen, he was tall and wiry. He had red hair and there were some freckles on his lean face.

Tense, he asked, "And this murderer—you're trying to find him?"

"Exactly!" announced Ryan. "All we know about him is that he usually goes by the monicker of Les Drake. He's wanted on several charges. We have reason to believe he killed a guy even before Tommy Shevlin got to him and got murdered also. We've got fingerprints, and so if we *do* find this fellow Drake we'll know whether we have

the right man or not."

"But you've never seen him?" prodded the kid. "He's never been mugged?"

"Never," said Slug.

"Then how do you expect to pick him up?"

MIKE RYAN put his big hands on his knees and leaned toward Danny. "That's where you come in, kid. You see, this guy Drake has a sister. We figured sooner or later Drake would try to get in touch with her. By watching the sister, we'd nab Drake."

"Sure," agreed Danny. "That should be a simple job. Certainly the New York police department has enough men to handle it——"

"The trouble is," said Slug, moving restlessly up and down the bedroom, "this sister, too, has disappeared!"

Danny sighed and looked hopelessly at his two friends. "Then you're right back where you started from. So why get me all upset about that hockey game? There's no reason why I still can't go——"

He paused, because Ryan was talking again, and what Ryan was saying brought the kid up alert.

". . . and so," Ryan was saying, "this sister of Drake's has a kid—a girl about your own age. Her name's Sally, and the mother has left her at this small town up the river a ways. The kid's going to school there in the village and boarding out at a small rooming house. We've got all the information and we even have arrangements for you to stay there too."

"In fact," said Slug cheerfully, "the woman who runs the place is expecting you tomorrow morning. We've told her your father is an army man, overseas, and that he's a war hero. She also thinks it's swell you're going to board at her place and——"

"Why?" said Danny quietly.

Slug stared at the kid. "Why?" he repeated. "Don't you see? Sooner or later this kid's mother will come to visit her. Or maybe she'll write. Your job is to get chummy with this girl Sally. Keep your eyes open. Watch for the letters sent by her mother. See where they come from. Once we locate the *mother,* the next step will be to shadow *her.* Eventually Les Drake will visit her, then—bingo—we got him!"

"You leave from Grand Central at 9:30 tomorrow morning," Mike Ryan said.

Danny's red hair almost bristled. "So!" he exclaimed. "The two of you had it all fixed up before you even came up here to see me! You certainly take a lot for granted. Why can't *you* two guys go to that town and do your own shadowing of this girl Sally——"

"Because," said Slug quickly, "we'd be recognized as coppers in an instant. Imagine Mike, here, in a village of five hundred people, or so! He's got detective written all over him. We're figuring that Les Drake *himself* might come to that town, and if he ever spotted us . . ."

They kept talking. Danny argued with them. His heart had been set on seeing that hockey game the following night. Besides, why should he spy on some girl named Sally, who was probably a nice sweet kid——

He said, "I'm not going to do it."

Mike and his partner kept talking.

ABOUT eleven o'clock the following morning, Danny got off the local train at a small town up the Hudson river. It was a hamlet nestled in the foothills of the mountains near West Point. It was a quiet and friendly little place. The station agent went into explicit detail in telling the kid just how to get to Mrs. Thompson's place.

Twenty minutes later Mrs. Thompson herself was standing in the doorway of Danny's second-floor room and chattering like a magpie.

"My goodness!" she was saying. "Your father a major in Europe! It's proud I am to have you, Danny. On the phone, your uncle said——"

Danny was unpacking a suitcase. He looked at the short, stout woman. There was some flour on her arms and in the house he could smell pies baking. "My uncle?" he said.

"Yes—Mr. Ryan. He said I was to make arrangements about your going to school here and everything. You start tomorrow morning, and you'll be in the same class with Sally. My, she's such a lovely girl. Incidentally, she'll be home soon for lunch and you'll meet her . . ."

Mrs. Thompson kept talking, and Danny was thinking, *So Mike Ryan's my uncle now, huh? And they've even arranged it so that I'm to go to school here in the town. Nice guys!*

He didn't think he was going to like this job at all!

Not that the kid wasn't intensely interested in detective work. Since that eventful day when he had first met Mike Ryan and O'Donnel when he had been a shoe-shine kid down near Centre Street headquarters, and had helped his two friends nab a crook, he had made a reputation for himself as the "kid detective."

Danny had an unusual ability for spotting clues and remembering people. He had an alert, agile mind and made a thorough study of police procedure. He even carried a special badge given to him by the police commissioner himself. In New York, he was quite famous.

But Ryan had assured him that his name would mean nothing up here in this small village. People up here were not interested in crooks and the goings-on of the New York police department. So they had arranged it that Danny use his own name. That way, he would feel more natural and would be less apt to make a slip.

But the kid still didn't like this idea of spying on some girl named Sally. From the buildup they'd been giving him about her, he guessed she was some homely-faced kid who was as fresh as they come!

Shortly after twelve noon, Mrs. Thompson called upstairs and told Danny that lunch was ready. He combed his hair, and went downstairs, and that's when he met this girl Sally.

HE WAS trying to eat his lunch, and at the same time he was watching her covertly. She was a quiet, shy girl with clear gray eyes and a sweet face. There was something about her, and Danny guessed that maybe she was lonesome.

In a way, Danny was a romantic kid. There was a manner about this girl Sally Mitchell that affected him. He wondered if she was happy.

Later, after she had gone back to school, Danny hung around his room. Mrs. Thompson had said something about going down to the village to do some shopping. Danny was to make himself right at home, she called upstairs.

The afternoon mail came while Mrs. Thompson was out. Danny went downstairs and took the letters out of the tin mail box outside the front door. He had heard the mailman's whistle blow, something you never heard in New York.

There was a letter for Sally. It was in a woman's neat handwriting, and was from Rochester, New York. There was no return address however. There was no doubt at all that it was from

the mother of the girl he must spy on.

Danny stared at it as he placed it with Mrs. Thompson's mail on the hall table. He remembered what Ryan and Slug had told him. They were cops, seeking a man who had killed a cop friend. They had no compunction at all when on a case like that.

They had suggested that Danny get one of Sally's letters while she was out, steam it open or something, and to find out all he could about her mother. Maybe learn her exact address and if anything was said in the letter about this man Les Drake.

And Danny kept staring at the letter, and finally he shook his head. She was a nice kid. He couldn't pry into one of her personal letters.

For two cents, right now, he'd call New York, reverse the charges, and get Ryan on the phone at headquarters and tell him the whole thing was off!

He went out and sat on the top steps of the front porch, chin cupped in his hands. He didn't like this kind of police work. Tangling with a real crook was different; he'd done that lots of times. But spying on a nice girl like Sally Mitchell . . .

The kid had never had a girl, but he thought now that if he ever *did* have a girl-friend, he'd like someone like Sally. That's why he felt the way he did about this . . .

HE SAT there thinking the thing over a long time, and before he knew it Sally was home from school.

"Hello," she said brightly as she came up the walk.

Danny spoke to her, smiling, and watched her as she went inside the house. He saw her look at the letters on the hall table, her face lighting up as she spied the topmost letter, the one postmarked Rochester. She ran up to her room with the letter in her hand.

It was from her mother, all right, Danny knew. And maybe inside that letter was some mention of her mother's brother—Les Drake—who had killed a cop friend of Ryan's. Ryan and Slug were *depending* upon him to find out!

He remembered Mike's explicit plans. Mike and Slug were going to drive up here from New York tomorrow night. They'd arranged to keep a rendezvous with Danny an hour after dark. He was to meet them just a half a block away, where this street intersected the through State route from New York. You could see the intersection from the porch, because Mrs. Thompson's house was the last one on the street.

Even as Danny glanced toward the corner, which Mike Ryan had so carefully mapped out, a car turned in from the highway and came slowly down the village street. Danny merely glanced at it. He was still thinking about Sally, upstairs. Perhaps she'd come down soon and maybe he could talk to her. Maybe she'd say something about the letter or her mother, and that way Danny could get her talking. She might even say something about this man Les Drake!

The car—a business coupe—that had passed a few moments ago came back down the street. One thing about it caught the kid's attention. The gas ration sticker—that and the New York State license number! There was a detail that bothered him . . .

Behind him, Sally came out on the porch and said, "Would you like to take a walk?"

"Sure," said Danny, forgetting all about the car.

They walked down-street, to the single block that was the shopping center of the village. It led downhill, and you could see the river, the mountains

rising up all around the shoreline. Quite a few cars were parked along the curb, and people were shopping. There was a lunch room and a soda fountain two doors away.

Sally talked about school, and the teachers, and what it would like for Danny tomorrow. He watched her fine, oval face, her deep gray eyes. She had soft chestnut hair. She was a pretty girl, and he liked her a lot. He didn't remember a thing she said about the school which he was supposed to attend.

She had to buy some writing paper. Oddly, she never mentioned her mother, which was the one thing in which Danny was interested. Afterwards, he said, "Let's have a soda," and pointed the way to the ice cream store.

He was holding the door for her, as she went inside, when he noticed the car across the street and the tall, lean man who was climbing out of it. He was a dark-haired fellow who was wearing a dark fedora and dark topcoat. He headed into the lunchroom without glancing right or left.

Yet Danny had the feeling the man might have been following them in the car!

"Looking for someone?" asked Sally, who was waiting for him just inside the store.

"Huh . . . no," Danny said quickly, catching up with her and heading toward a booth.

He was curious about that car.

AFTERWARDS, going out of the store, Sally took a letter from her purse and said, "Mind dropping this in the mail box for me, Danny?" She nodded toward a mail box on the corner.

Danny's back was toward her as he stepped toward the mail box, and for an instant his eyes saw the address on the letter. The words were immediately written indelibly on his quick mind. *Mrs. G. K. Mitchell*—and the location was in Rochester!

Starting up the hill a moment later with Sally, the kid's gaze slid toward the nearby lunchroom. He saw the tall dark man still seated at the counter. He tried to get a glimpse of the man's face, but could not. Then he and Sally were beyond the lunchroom.

Ryan and Slug had said no photograph had ever been taken of this murderer—Les Drake. Thus there was no way of recognizing the man even if Danny *did* see him. How was Danny to *know* him?

One thing Danny could do. He could telephone Ryan in New York and tell him this address in Rochester. Then maybe he wouldn't have to spy on Sally any more. Ryan and Slug could take over. This was one assignment that the kid didn't like at all.

He walked Sally home, and Mrs. Thompson was there, and so the kid had no chance to get downtown again in order to call New York. Mrs. Thompson kept right on talking, right through dinner even, and afterwards she suggested that the three of them take in the early show at the theater downtown. Mickey Rooney was playing.

Danny made excuses. He had some things to get ready for school tomorrow, he said. He was tired from his trip. Sally looked disappointed and it made him feel like a heel.

But after they had gone, Danny immediately put through a call to Mike Ryan. He caught him in his office at Centre Street headquarters. He told Ryan about the Rochester address, explaining how he felt certain it was the mother's address.

Ryan's voice boomed cheerfully over the phone. "Swell, kid! Swell! That must be it, all right. Who else would

she be writing to? We'll get Rochester on it right away. We'll have them assign someone to pick up her mother and question her. Don't worry, we'll find out about this guy Drake!"

Then Mike added, "Slug and I will pick you up tomorrow night just as we said. You stick around, Danny, just in case you pick up something else. But I think this is all we need. We'll have a line on Les Drake before morning, I'll bet you."

A thought flashed through Danny's mind. "But what about Sally?" he asked quickly. "What if Les Drake comes to see *her?* A dangerous guy like that . . . why, there's no telling . . ."

Mike cut in, "Don't worry about Sally. That's why her mother put her down there to go to school. The kid doesn't even *know* about Les Drake, and we've learned he doesn't know where she is either. It's the mother he'll try to see. We know he's up against it for money, and he'll come to her like he has before. We *know* these things, Danny."

"I hope so," the kid said doubtfully, and after Ryan had assured him they'd pick him up tomorrow night, he hung up.

A HALF hour later, while Danny was sitting upstairs in his room, he noticed a car roll past the house in the dark. Twice again a car passed, and he was positive it was the same one—because there was something too deliberate in the way the person drove by. On this isolated side street, not one other car went by in hours.

It bothered Danny. He thought of Sally downtown there with Mrs. Thompson. Part of their walk home would be along shadowed streets, and he kept thinking of that business coupe with the ration sticker and license plates from upstate. New York State had a system of license tags which designated what county a car was registered in. He had noticed this detail early this afternoon. Funny about that fellow in the car!

Danny slipped on his leather zipper jacket and went out. The air was cool and crisp, and he walked quickly down the side street. But he saw no sign of the car again.

He hung around downtown, watching for it, until Mrs. Thompson and Sally came out of the show. He saw no sign of the coupe or the tall man again.

On the way home, Sally said, "I thought you were tired. We guessed you had gone to bed."

"My goodness, yes," said Mrs. Thompson.

Danny told them, "It's still pretty early. I wasn't sleepy."

Neither was he sleepy later, after Mrs. Thompson and Sally had retired. Danny sat in the darkness of his room, at the window, watching out into the quiet night. He kept thinking that maybe Les Drake had not been able to locate Sally's mother, but maybe he knew where *Sally* was! He might come here, forcing her to tell where her mother was living. A guy like that, a murderer, and Sally such a swell girl . . .

He sat there until long past midnight, but he saw no sign of the car again. Finally, he went to bed.

THE following morning Sally waited for him. She said gayly, "I'll walk you to school. You'll like it here."

Mrs. Thompson followed them to the door. "I won't be here for dinner tonight," she told them. "My sister Nettie has the sewing circle this evening, and I'm going down there for a bit. But I'll be home early. You'll find everything all fixed in the ice box."

Danny thought it was nice being with Sally, walking to school with her and all, but the school business itself bothered him.

In New York he did all his studying alone, at home. Between times he shined shoes or hung around headquarters with his two detective friends.

Somehow, he struggled through the tedious day. There was too much inaction to suit him. At three o'clock, he met Sally and suggested walking home with her.

She said, "Today's my special Red Cross class. I'll be here for an hour or so yet. But I'll see you at home, Danny."

He went home and hung around. He even took a stroll around the village to kill some time.

At six o'clock, Sally wasn't home yet!

Danny even walked back to the school, and found all the doors locked. He had no idea where Sally might have gone, especially with Mrs. Thompson away for the evening. He didn't even know where Mrs. Thompson was!

He went back to the house, terribly upset, and kept watching for Sally to come home. It was starting to get dark, and the air was colder. Surely she wouldn't have just stayed out, with it cold and all like this!

Restless, he kept going up and downstairs to his room. Sally's room door was open. He glanced inside, at her shoes lined up in orderly fashion beneath the bed, at her dresses hanging up in neat fashion in the closet, the door of which was partly open. She was a meticulous girl . . .

Odd then, he thought, that the bureau drawers should be left open in helter-skelter fashion! He stepped across the room, saw instantly that contents of the bureau had been rummaged through as though by someone seeking something in a hurry. It didn't seem like Sally at all, he decided worriedly.

Then his glance froze on the rug.

Apparently in getting ready for school that morning, Sally had spilled some powder. It had scattered in a fine, thin layer on the rug.

And now, distinctly visible in the thin layer of powder, was the imprint of a shoe. A large imprint, quite clearly defined.

A man's footprint!

Danny's blood ran cold. Someone had been here in the house, probably after Mrs. Thompson had left, and they had been right up here in Sally's room. And a person who had no right to be—because Mrs. Thompson, Danny knew, was a widow!

And why wasn't Sally home yet, and what had happened?

He hurried downstairs again, grabbing his leather jacket from the hall chair, and started toward the front door. *He had to find her!*

THEN footsteps ran across the front porch and the door burst open into the hallway. Sally came in, her usually pretty face strained and frightened. She was panting with excitement.

She cried, "Danny . . that man . . . he followed me!"

"What man, Sally?"

"After school . . . I was on my way home and it was getting rather late. There was nobody around just at the time and I saw him following me in the car. I was so scared!"

Danny took hold of her hands. They were cold, and she was trembling. He said, "What did you do?"

"I cut through that lane halfway home from school. I saw him driving around and around the block. I hid in that old barn on the Turner place—about half a mile from here—until it started to get dark and I was afraid to stay. Then . . . then I ran all the way

home. I was really scared, Danny."

Danny kept holding her hands, and her excitement subsided a little. He asked directly, "Sally, do you know a man named Les Drake?"

She shook her head. "Why?"

"Never mind," he told her. He was thinking. It was Les Drake, all right, no doubt about it. The tall, dark man he had spotted in the business coupe yesterday. Les Drake had been right here in this house sometime this afternoon and had searched through Sally's room looking for something.

Her mother's address, obviously. And he couldn't have found it, otherwise why had he followed Sally home from school. And Les Drake was a dangerous murderer!

If Ryan and Slug were only here . .

Danny's glance went to the glass of the front hall door. It was dark outside now. Ryan had said they'd be here about a half hour after dark, at the meeting place just down the street at the corner of the State road.

He looked at Sally and asked, "How's your nerve? I mean, will you stay here alone for a few minutes?"

Her deep gray eyes held on Danny's face. "W-why?"

"Two friends of mine are meeting me soon," he said. "They happen to be—detectives. Look, do this. Go up to your room and lock the door. Don't turn on the light. But if you hear *anyone* come up on the porch, or near the house, switch on your light. I'll be able to see it from the corner. I'll run right back."

"You're sure?" Sally asked worriedly.

"Sure! Now don't worry." He moved toward the front door. "Now lock this door after me when I go out."

A moment later he was moving through the dark shadows of the street. If Mike Ryan and Slug only arrived on schedule, if something didn't delay them, maybe they could help Danny locate this man in the coupe——

He had gone less than a hundred yards when his steps slowed, and he slid into the blacker shadows caused by one of the old elms lining the street.

Just ahead, near the end of the block, a car was parked. It was a coupe!

There was a stretch of woods on one side of the road, empty lots on the other. A desolate section. Danny was positive it was the tall, dark-haired man's car, the one he had seen several times now.

He waited. He wondered if the man was in the car.

Danny glanced over his shoulder, back at Mrs. Thompson's house, and his blood froze. The light was on in Sally's room. The man was *there*—at the house!

DANNY leaped down the street. There was no thought of danger to himself now. He wasn't even thinking of Ryan and Slug O'Donnel. He was a kid who, when danger came, was not afraid—especially when it threatened a girl like Sally!

On a sudden thought, he drew up short and raced back to where the coupe was parked. He bent down near the license plate in the rear and noted the number. It was the same car all right.

An instant later he was streaking back toward the house. He saw the ladder placed below Sally's window!

He had just reached the front steps when the front door opened and the man came hurrying out. One of the tall man's arms clutched Sally's shoulders. His free hand was clamped over her mouth.

Danny yelled, "Hey!" and slammed toward the man.

The fellow released Sally and spun toward the kid. His fist lashed out and he uttered an oath of surprise. His blow

missed the kid's jaw. Danny sank his hard fist into the man's midriff, and there was a grunt of surprise and pain.

The kid was quick. And hard and tough. Sally was crying as she cringed back near the porch rail.

The man tried to grapple with Danny Garrett, but the kid stayed clear, diving in for a quick punch, then sliding agilely clear again. He yelled to Sally, "Run! Get down the street. Get someone!"

The girl started to dodge past them. For an instant Danny's gaze swept toward her, to make certain that she was all right. It was the instant of time the tall man needed.

His fist crashed alongside Danny's jaw. The kid wasn't knocked out, but he staggered backwards. His foot tripped across the topmost step and he went tumbling downward. The back of his head crashed the bottom step and he rolled, dazed, onto the grass.

He tried to struggle to his feet, and his head reeled. He slumped down again . . .

HOW long it was before his thoughts cleared completely he wasn't sure. Seconds probably. Then he was on his feet and running. He heard the car starter turning over down the street. The starter kept grinding.

As he neared the car Danny saw a blurred form climb out and hurry to raise the hood. There was a soft, angry curse in the night.

Danny was six feet from the fellow when his foot scuffed some gravel in the roadway. The tall man whirled, saw the kid, muttered something and leaped in for the attack. His strong fingers caught the kid's jacket collar and started to twist.

Danny struggled. The leather coat was being twisted tightly around his throat. A moment more and he would be strangled.

Danny fought wildly. But his strength was no match for the tall man's. The coat collar was gagging him . . . His thoughts blurred hazily.

He remembered something like a brilliant light striking him in the face. It was a car . . . a car swinging in from the State road. The next moment brakes were squealing and the car was coming to a fast stop.

Danny heard Mike Ryan's voice boom from the car, "Say! What's going on?"

And then Danny got his breath long enough to cry out: "Mike! It's him! Les Drake!"

The rest was all pretty crazy and mixed up. The man released the kid and started a dive toward the nearby woods. Shots crashed out. He heard Mike Ryan calling out, and he vaguely remembered that Slug was there too.

Also, a woman—a small, trim-looking woman had climbed out of Ryan's car. She stared at Danny, and you could see the resemblance to Sally in her fine features.

She was running toward Danny Garrett.

Danny swung and looked inside the car. Sally was there, all right. The man had bound her wrists with a cord and there was a gag which had been jammed hastily into her mouth. Danny remembered yanking the gag loose. His head was reeling and he was feeling funny.

He heard Sally cry out, "Mother!" and then that's the last thing he did remember.

THEN he was in bed, and big Mike Ryan was there, and Slug, and the girl's mother. And Mrs. Thompson fluttering around in the background saying, "My goodness! Who would have ever thought——"

Danny tried to sit up. Mike Ryan

said cautiously, "Better take it easy, kid. You got an awful lump on the back of your head. It's nothing serious, luckily. All you need is a little rest. . ."

Danny stared up at them. "That man," he asked, "was he——"

Ryan nodded. "Yes, he was Les Drake! Slug winged him. We've turned him over to the State troopers, temporarily. He'll be taken back to the city to stand trial for that cop's murder."

Ryan turned and looked at the small, nice-looking woman. "Sally's mother has positively identified him. It's Drake, all right."

Danny looked at her. She said, "He was not my real brother. He was a half brother. He was never—any good." She came up to the bed and touched Danny's arm. "You're a brave young man!"

Ryan added, "We checked on that Rochester address, kid." He looked at the woman. "Rochester police learned that Drake had been trying to locate Mrs. Mitchell. She got away just before he found her, and went to the local police. Then Drake ducked town in a stolen car—the one you saw, kid."

Danny said, "I wondered about the car. It had upstate license plates and yet it carried only an A-card gas sticker. I wondered how anyone could drive so far on only an A-card."

Ryan nodded. "He had stolen gas ration books, too." He nodded to Mrs. Mitchell again. "Sally's mother came directly to New York in order to help us. She was afraid of this man Drake. Just recently she learned he was a killer. She got in this afternoon and we brought her up here with us."

Danny said suddenly, "Where's Sally?" And then, worried, "Is . . . is she all right?"

The woman smiled and touched Danny's arm again. "Thanks to you, Danny—yes! She's getting ready for bed. I'll call her."

AND then they had all stepped outside a moment, and Sally came quietly into the room. She was wearing a blue bathrobe over her pajamas, and Danny thought she looked prettier than ever with her hair hanging loose down around her shoulders.

She sat down on the edge of the bed and asked, "How do you feel, Danny?"

He grinned. "I feel swell."

Big Mike Ryan stuck his head inside the room. "Hey, kid," he said, "We're sure lucky. If that guy's car hadn't stalled, he'd of got clean away!"

Danny motioned toward his jacket, which he saw hanging on a chair. "You'll find the rotor in my pocket. I removed it from the distributor. That way, you can't start a car. A truck driver showed me that trick."

Ryan smiled and said to Sally, "He's a smart boy. He really doesn't need to go to school."

Danny raised up quickly on an elbow and exclaimed, "Wait a minute! I think I'd like to go to school up here." He realized suddenly that Sally was holding his hand. He thought she was pretty swell.

Mike Ryan looked startled. He started to say, "You'd *like* to go to school . . ." Next he swung hurriedly toward the hallway. He appeared worried. "Hey, Slug!" he bellowed. "Come here a minute!"

Buy War Bonds

Bullets spraying the sidewalk gave me my chance

NOBODY'S DIAMONDS

By H. WOLFF SALZ

THERE was nothing in his very ordinary appearance, shy manner or simple request that could possibly have been construed as an omen of misfortune and sudden tragedy. He was short, probably no more than five-feet-five, about forty years old, and shaped like a turtle—mostly body, with a small head and disproportionately short legs and arms.

He said he was broken-hearted, but I doubted it. There was a kind of cynical hardness in his round, almost cherubic face, that made me doubt whether he had a heart to begin with.

Seven years of ups and downs as a private detective had taught me, the hard way, not to accept a prospective client's manner or song-and-dance at face value. I had also learned not to be misled by first impressions.

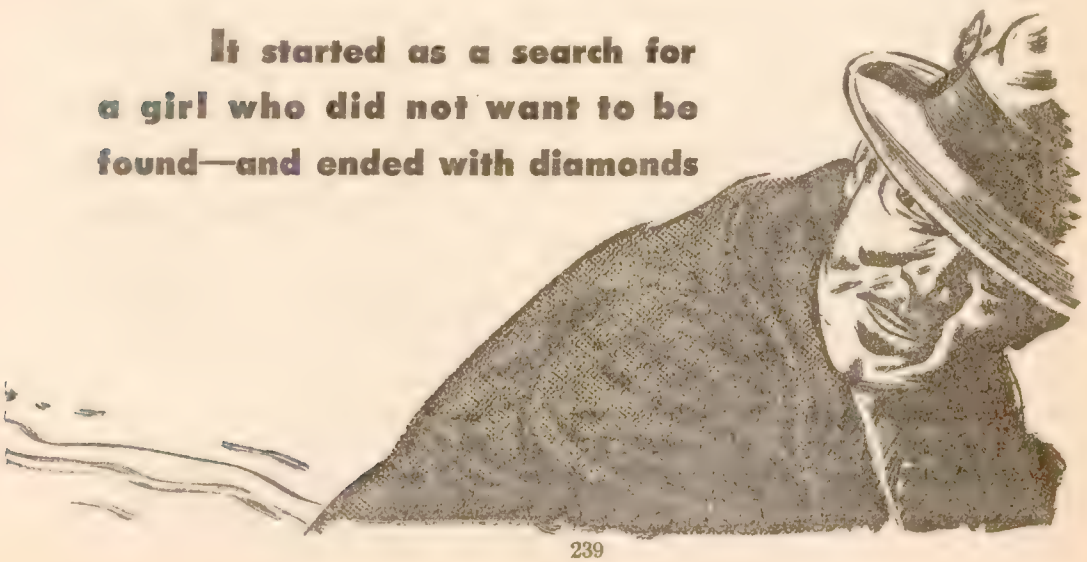
"You say the girl is your niece?" I asked.

Kleber leaned across the desk and handed me a postcard-size photo. "Hilda Ghent, my sister's daughter," he murmured.

My lips puckered in a low whistle of frank admiration. Every man has his weakness. In some cases, it's blondes, some redheads, some brunettes. But I'm not narrow-minded. I've got a soft spot for any pretty girl with well-turned limbs. And the dark-haired, delicate-featured girl in the photo was pretty—all the more so because of the sadness of her large eyes.

"When did you see her last?"

It started as a search for a girl who did not want to be found—and ended with diamonds



"She disappeared three days ago."

"Why don't you go to the cops?"

"No, no!" Kleber protested. "You don't understand, Mr. Donovan. This is only a family matter. Hilda—well, frankly, Hilda does not like me. She has some silly idea that I wronged her parents. And she will not accept help from me. But I can't let her do this. You know how it is. A pretty girl, all alone and a stranger in this country."

"When did she come to the United States?"

"Well, when the Nazis invaded Holland in 1940, she and her father escaped to France. Then they managed somehow to get to Cuba. Three months ago, they entered the United States."

I remembered an obscure item in one of the newspapers of about a week ago. There had been no reason to remember it until William Kleber mentioned the girl's background.

"Hilda is the daughter of Hendrick Ghent?"

Kleber nodded. "Poor Hendrick—he was broken-hearted and forlorn, a stranger in a new country. And in poor health. But it was so wrong of him. He should have come to me for help. He should not have committed suicide."

"Why do you want to find Hilda?"

Kleber spread his pudgy hands as if the answer were self-evident. "But you can see for yourself," he cried. "I must do something for her. She is penniless. She may be in trouble!"

"And suppose I find her for you?" I said. "What then? You say she won't take anything from you."

KLEBER'S fat, manicured hand reached into the bosom pocket of his well-tailored blue serge suit coat, drew out a neat packet of bills and pushed it towards me.

"Count it," he said. "Two thousand dollars!"

"What am I supposed to do with it?"

"Find Hilda. Give her the money. Tell her anything. Say it is insurance money her father left. Make up your own story, but don't tell her the money is from me, or she will not take it."

"What makes you think you can trust me with the dough?"

Kleber drew back in his chair, an injured expression on his face, as if my remark were an insult to his intelligence.

"I know your reputation as a detective, Mr. Donovan," he retorted emphatically.

"Then you must also know," I remarked, "that I've got a helluva big appetite."

Kleber drew a billfold from the inner sanctum of his bosom pocket. He counted out fifteen crisp twenties, pushed it across the desk.

"I am not a rich man," he murmured. "But there will be another two hundred after you have finished the job."

I eyed the man thoughtfully. Somehow his story just didn't seem to hold water. Kleber claimed he wasn't a rich man, yet was willing to spend five hundred dollars so he could give away two thousand.

My eyes wandered to the picture of the bright-eyed girl. Well, every man to his weakness. I've got mine. A pretty face—and a hunk of cash. I nodded and watched relief spread over Kleber's face.

After he departed, I reached for the phonebook. William Kleber was listed in the yellow pages as a research chemist. That much checked. I started to dial a number, but stopped when I heard a sound at the door.

"Hello, Johnny."

I looked up distastefully at the lean, narrow-shouldered, dehydrated character who lounged in my office doorway. His face looked like one of those trick

photographs that are taken out of focus, showing a foot or a fist larger than all the rest of the body. In his case, it was the long, crooked nose that seemed to have been magnified beyond all decent proportions by a trick camera shot.

"What foul wind brings you around, Munger?"

Munger didn't reply and I wrinkled my nose as a second man pushed into the doorway beside Munger. He was a stolid, chunky man with powerful shoulders and chest. There was a hard gleam in his black eyes. But not even his menacing expression could give strength to his slack mouth and abbreviated chin. That, I knew, was the dangerous thing about Nucky Horton. Fear gave him a nervous trigger finger. Not to mention the obvious fact that he was coked to the gills.

"What is this?" I snorted. "Old home week for the boys from Leavenworth?"

Munger ambled across the room, perched on the edge of my desk. His eyes strayed to Hilda's photo.

"Take a tip, Donovan, stay out of this deal."

I eyed him with renewed interest. "What deal?"

I tried to keep one eye on Horton, who had moved around my desk to the window behind me. I swung around in my swivel chair to keep both gunners in view.

Munger picked up Hilda's picture. He spoke in carefully measured words, "Plenty of guys walk themselves into trouble following their nose where it don't belong."

I reached across and took the picture from his fingers. Somehow, it didn't seem right to have the photo of a lovely looking girl like Hilda pawed over by an all-American rat like Munger.

"Good advice," I agreed. "Take some of it yourself."

MY EYES had strayed from Horton at the window. Suddenly, I saw the flash of his shadow surge forward. I spun my chair, but too late. His powerful arms closed around me like steel bands, pinning my arms against my sides.

At the same moment, Munger slipped around the desk, reached under my suit coat and drew out my .38 Colt Special. He stepped backwards, dropped my revolver into a side pocket of his green-toned gabardine suit coat. His right hand remained in his other pocket and the bulge there wasn't made entirely by his hand, I knew.

Horton released my arms. I swung my chair around, lunged upward. My right fist shot out in a straight line, cracked against Horton's chin with a snapping sound that made me feel good. Horton bellowed in rage and lunged towards me.

Before he reached me something exploded against the back of my skull. Fire, like the sparks of a welder's torch, erupted in my head. I had turned my back on Munger. I saw Horton's fist shoot toward my face big as a basketball, but my arms were too numbed to ward it off.

I heard Munger's voice through a fog, "Save it, Nucky!"

But Horton didn't believe in saving anything. His fists pistoned into my face in swift, precise blows. Then the light in my eyes went out like a kerosene lamp in a cyclone.

Somebody seemed to be slapping me with a pillow. I screwed my eyes open. Munger was standing over me.

"Okay, come on!"

His arms reached out, jerked me to my feet. At my left, Horton waited with his hands buried in his pockets.

I tried to shake the fog out of my head. This whole thing didn't seem to make any sense. They were guiding

me toward my office door.

Munger reached up, flicked the light out and we were walking down the third floor corridor toward the elevator bank.

At my side, Munger whispered, "No dumb plays, Donovan. We're with you all the way!"

"What goes on?" I demanded. I still couldn't get things straight in my mind.

"Nothing, pal," Munger murmured. "We're just doing you a favor. See, Johnny, you got the rep for being a right guy, so I shoot straight with you. I just don't want you buttin' your nose in where it don't belong."

"Kleber?" I asked.

"Yeah, Kleber. And the doll."

"You don't want me to find her, is that it?"

"Just keep your yap buttoned," Horton snapped.

On the way down, there were three or four other people in the elevator cage with us. But I knew better than to try any heroics just then. Munger and Horton were squeezed tight against me on either side. I could feel the pressure of their pocketed rods on my hips.

We crossed Olive street, turned east. It was after the evening rush and there were few people out. Behind me I heard a newsboy's voice calling out the war news. Shop windows were bright with lights. There was no dim-out in this midwestern city, no chance for me to try a sudden escape into the dark. We were walking three abreast.

I heard the sharp crack almost the same instant that the slug kicked up sidewalk cement a yard ahead of us. The shot had been fired from somewhere above us, across the street.

ACTION became swift-paced, like the uncontrolled spinning of a motion picture reel. A second shot split the air. Munger and Horton dived headlong behind a car parked at the curb. I spun and dashed in the opposite direction.

I leaped through the swinging door of the dime store at the corner, rushed down an aisle, knocking a couple of women shoppers sidewise against counters. I couldn't stop for apologies. I came out at the side door, around the corner.

Sammy Gold, the little newsboy, hurried to my side. "They're running down the block, Johnny!"

I rushed to the corner, Sammy at my heels. I was in time to see Munger and Horton scramble into a parked car at the far end of the block. I shot a swift glance around. There wasn't a cab in sight.

I grabbed Sammy's arm. "Get on your bike, kid! Tail those rats! And be careful, don't let 'em see you!"

Sammy dropped his papers on his newsbox, leaped astride the bicycle leaning against it and paddled swiftly down the street. I didn't think he'd be able to keep the car in sight. But there was a slim chance, especially if they remained in the congested downtown area, where the narrow streets forced traffic to move slowly.

I hurried across the street, took an elevator back to my office. I had seen, as I broke away from Munger and Horton, that those shots had been fired from my own darkened office window!

The office was empty. Nothing seemed to have been touched. But there was still a trace of cordite odor in the air. Whoever had fired those shots could have been half-way to Shangri-la by now. But who had been his intended target? The gunmen, Munger and Horton? Or had he been aiming at me?

Or, I thought, it might just be possible that the unseen gunner had been William Kleber, the man who had hired me to find his niece. It was possible

that he had seen the gunmen go into my office after he left and had waited around to see what would happen, then had fired those shots to give me a chance to escape.

In that case, there was a helluva a lot more to this thing than the simple little story he had told me.

"Something," I murmured, "don't smell right, and I don't mean the Nazis in Denmark."

At my desk I reached for the phone-book. Kleber had supplied me with the address of Hilda Ghent's boarding house, before she had disappeared. Before dialing the number, I picked up Hilda Ghent's picture from the floor, where it had fallen during my scuffle with the gunmen. I didn't bother looking for the money Kleber had left on the desk. I had seen Horton stuff it into his pocket on our way out. That was one more bill I had to collect from him.

The woman who answered the phone at the other end of the line identified herself as Mrs. Ryan, the landlady. She had nothing to add to what Kleber had told me. Hilda and her father had had no friends in town, as far as she knew. No one had come to visit them, during the two weeks they lived there. The girl had moved out the day after her father's funeral and had left no forwarding address.

Searching for a person who doesn't want to be found, in a city of a million, is like searching for a drop in the ocean.

IT WAS now seven-thirty and there were few of the usual places I could check with at this time. I phoned the hospitals, then police headquarters. No soap. I'd have to wait till morning to check with the employment agencies, loan companies, and the consulate of the exiled Dutch government.

I was about to phone the morgue when Sammy Gold arrived breathless at my office.

"You know where them guys went?" he cried. "You know down the levee where them towboats dock? There's one of them boats called the *River Queen*. It's tied up at the foot of Market Street. Well, them guys went on this boat and I waited around for a while, but they don't come off."

"Swell, Sammy." I pushed a five-dollar bill towards him.

He shook his head, backed away. "No, thanks, Johnny. You done plenty for me already."

"Don't be stupid, Sam. You earned it."

"Well, okay, Johnny, but you don't have to pay me for no favors."

The foot of Market Street was five blocks east and two blocks north of my office. I took a cab to within a block of the levee on Market and walked the rest of the way down the steep, dark deserted street to the river.

The *River Queen* was a squat, blunt-prowed stern-wheeler, a dark blot against the night darkness. Only a few lights showed on the tow-boat. Plumes of smoke from the soughing twin smokestacks blackened the sky. I could hear the throbbing engines and guessed that she was due to get under way soon.

But the landing stage hadn't been pulled up yet. I saw a shadowy figure come down the gangplank and move across the levee towards the lights of a waterfront saloon nearby.

Moving swiftly, I came up behind the man in the cavernous darkness under the railroad elevated tracks. He whirled as he heard my footsteps.

"Keep your mouth shut!" I snapped.

I heard his gasp as he saw the bulge my right fist made in my suit coat pocket.

"Look, mister, the boat's pulling out

in fifteen minutes. I just got time to make a phone call. If it's dough you want—"

"Shut up!" I ordered. "Where's the girl?"

"What girl?" He sounded bewildered.

"The girl on that boat!"

"Which one?" he stammered. "There's four of 'em on the boat! Two waitresses and two laundresses!"

His answer startled me. I had been half convinced that Hilda Ghent was a prisoner on the towboat. How else could I account for Munger's and Horton's presence on the boat?

"Walk to that street lamp!" I snapped.

He did as I ordered. I was a step behind him. With my left hand I drew Hilda's picture out of my pocket, held it out towards him.

"Is that one of the girls?"

The man squinted at the picture in the dull glow of the overhead light, nodded. "Sure, that's the new girl, Mary Willems. Took a job as a waitress two days ago."

I pocketed the photo. "Okay, go ahead and make your phone call!"

HE looked startled, then turned and dashed to the saloon thirty yards down the levee. I moved back towards the *River Queen*. I wasn't sure I could believe the riverman's story. Still, it sounded more logical than my earlier guess that Hilda was a prisoner on that boat.

These huge river towboats are part of a many-million-dollar legitimate business, carrying tons of important war cargo on the Mississippi. It was hard to believe that the officers in charge of the *River Queen* could be involved in some kind of crooked deal with rats like Munger and Horton. Yet, what were those gunmen doing aboard the riverboat? And what was their interest in Hilda Ghent? Why had they tried to prevent my search for her?

Their interest in the girl indicated that there was a good deal more to this case than the simple little story Kleber had told me.

My mind must have been completely immersed in that problem as I slipped through the dark towards the *River Queen*. That was why I didn't hear any movement behind me. When I heard the scrape of a shoe on the levee cobblestones and whirled, I was too late.

The lunging shadow was only a yard behind me. I saw only a blur of movement in the darkness, tried to duck under the descending arm. But not fast enough. Gun-metal whipped my face, lashed downward diagonally from my forehead, across my nose and to my chin. My head seemed to erupt with pain and fire. My arms groped helplessly towards the blurred shadow. Something like a bomb exploded in my face a second time. The world dropped away in a red haze. Then I was in a dark, endless void.

WHEN my eyes opened, they stared dully at the starless sky. I wondered why I couldn't remember the party that had given me this terrific hangover. Slowly I became aware that I wasn't lying in my own bed. I was stretched out on a hard bed of cobblestones. Then the recollection of all that had happened returned with a rush.

I pushed myself to my feet as gently as I could, grunted involuntarily as pain knifed through my skull downward to the base of my spine. The pain was forgotten abruptly as I stared at the place on the levee where the *River Queen* had been docked. The towboat was no longer there.

The sound of soughing smokestacks and churning paddle-wheels reached me

from the middle of the river. Straining my eyes, I could make out the ghost-like shadow of the *River Queen* and its long tow of barges gliding in a graceful arc to turn downstream. It was moving slowly, probably no more than four or five miles an hour—just getting up steam.

I broke into a run, heading south along the steep incline of the levee. Several times I stumbled on the uneven cobblestones, but even at that I could make better speed than the slow-moving riverboat.

At a point fifty yards in advance of the boat, I wheeled and plunged into the water. The current was swift, but that was more of a help than a hindrance. The *River Queen* was chugging along faster now, but the current carried me downstream, in advance of the boat.

Swimming fully clothed is like swimming in a strait-jacket and with a couple of bricks tied to each foot. But back in the early 1930's, the Marines had taken real pains to teach me to swim loaded down with a full pack. That had been long before the war and before I'd been given my discharge when the concussion of a target shell punctured my left eardrum. My Marine training paid off in extra dividends now.

The current became rougher as the big towboat and its string of ten barges loomed nearer. It was a full time job fighting the waves that billowed me back towards the shore.

No lights showed on the outside of the towboat or the barges. I knew that all lights had been doused so the pilot wouldn't be blinded. The foremost of the barges churned past me like a great phantom. The ropes and ratchet wheels that lashed the barges together squealed and groaned like angry wild hogs.

Something whipped my face. My fingers groped up toward it, caught a dangling rope. I held on, let it drag me along for a moment as I gathered my strength.

Then, hand over hand, I pulled myself out of the churning river. A couple of minutes later, I sprawled on the narrow catwalk at the starboard side of the foremost barge. My chest rose and fell raggedly. The struggle to get on the barge had taken my last ounce of strength.

I heard a voice around the corner of the barge, at the blunt prow. My breath caught in my throat.

I relaxed as I recognized the low singsong words: "Half Twain . . . Quarter Twain. . ."

I knew it was the leadsman, calling the soundings back to the pilot over a two-way loudspeaker.

Silently, I groped to my feet, slipped along the catwalk towards the stern of the barge, feeling my way inch by inch in the pitch blackness. One wrong step and I would plunge back into the river.

Two faint, parallel white lines showed me the plank between the first and second barges. The white lines were made by flour smeared along the edges of the slippery plank to guide the rivermen in the dark. I knew that not even the flicker of a match was allowed out here on the barges, for fear it might blind the pilot.

THE distance between the leading barge and the prow of the towboat was only about six hundred feet. But I was more than ten minutes inching my way sternward between the great hulking barges to the fuel flat and then across the last slippery plank to the tow boat.

I crouched behind the protective bulwark of the blunt, steel prow. My eyes strained through the darkness, saw no movement on the fo'c's'le. To the starboard I could make out only the wan green light over the engine-room door.

Now that I was on the *River Queen* I was undecided about my next move. That Hilda Ghent was on the towboat I was certain. I was also reasonably sure that Munger and Horton were aboard the boat. But I wasn't concerned with them right now. My first job was to find Hilda Ghent.

I edged along the fo'c's'le towards the port side. At the end of the deck house I peered cautiously around the corner, caught my breath. Not four yards from me, I could make out the surging shadows of two struggling figures. Not a sound issued from either of them. Only the scraping of their feet on the deckboards was audible.

Suddenly there was a dull splat—the sound made by a silenced gun. A streak of orange flame ripped the darkness apart, but only for a moment. Then blackness again. Before I could move, one of the figures disengaged itself and ran towards the stern, quickly melted into the darkness.

I leaped forward, forgetting my own precarious position. I bent over the motionless figure near the railing, drew in a sharp breath. Even in the darkness I could make out the rapidly spreading circle of blood on Chippy Munger's shirtfront. His eyes were wide open. No examination was necessary to show that Munger was dead.

My body stiffened as I heard a sharp cry behind me. I caught a blur of movement, saw a figure dash out of the port side engine-room door. One of the rivermen must have come out for a breath of air and had seen me bending over the body. I wheeled, ran towards the stern, in the direction taken by the killer.

I jerked to a stop as other figures poured down a steel stairway from the deck above, brought out by the yells of the man behind me. I turned back, hesitated, and realized I was trapped. Shadowy forms were converging on me from both sides. My only escape lay in the river overside.

I leaped towards the railing. A powerful form hurtled into my back. I was thrown to the floor. My fists lashed out at the man on top of me. Someone caught my arms from behind and I was pinned helpless to the deckboards.

"Get the captain! . . . What happened? . . . Murdered! . . . The killer!"

Excited voices ebbed and flowed all around me.

"Who is he?"

"Don't know. Look at his wet clothes. He must have swum out from shore!"

I was jerked to my feet. Each of my arms was held in a vise-like trap by a husky riverman. I was guided roughly up a companionway, pushed into a lighted cabin.

A frowning, florid-faced man with a barrel-like chest faced me. He listened to the jumbled reports of the deck hands. One of them said he was sure he had seen me fire the gun. Another claimed he saw me hurl the gun overboard. I knew they were excited, didn't realize the significance of what they were saying. But that didn't help me.

My eyes strayed around the circle of faces beyond the doorway. There in the midst of the rivermen was Nucky Horton. There was no recognition in his eyes. And behind him, at the rim of the crowd was another face I recognized, Hilda Ghent.

"Clear out, the lot of you!" bellowed the florid-faced man who the rivermen had addressed as Captain Oley. "Jensen, close the door! We'll talk to this fellow alone!"

WHEN the door had been closed in the faces of the curious crowd of rivermen, Captain Oley turned to me. "Well?" he demanded.

I reached towards my bosom pocket.

Jensen, who was evidently the mate, leaped forward, caught my wrist in an iron grip. His big right fist cocked back.

"Hold it!" I snapped. "I'm getting my identification papers!"

"We don't need your identification papers to know you're a killer!" Captain Oley shouted. "Killing off one of my men! And at a time when help is so scarce you have to hire any lubber that comes along!"

"I didn't kill that man!" I retorted. "Give your larynx a rest and let me explain!"

"What are you doing on my boat?" Oley demanded.

"My name is Donovan. I'm a private detective. I was hired to find a girl and she's working on this boat!" I reeled that off rapidly, before Oley or the mate could interrupt. "Your boat was already under way when I got to the levee so I had to swim out. Then I walked right into that killing below. The man who did it ran off before I could get a look at his face."

Oley snorted. "Who's the girl you're supposed to be looking for?"

"Her name's Hilda Ghent, but she's using the name Mary Willems."

"Who hired you to find her?"

"Her uncle, a man named Kleber."

"Let's have a look at those identification papers of yours."

I reached towards my pocket. The mate stopped me. "I'll get it!"

He passed his hand under my wet suit coat, drew out all the damp papers from my inside pocket, passed them to Captain Oley.

Besides my Marine discharge papers, there were some of my business cards, my wallet, a couple of letters from buddies who were still Jap-hunting with the Marines.

When Oley had glanced through the papers, he growled at Jensen, "Get the Willems girl and bring her in here!"

Jensen opened the door and I saw him go to a door about ten yards down the passageway. There was one chair in the captain's cabin, in front of a small battered roll-top desk. Oley motioned me to the chair. He sat down on the edge of his bunk, pushed a black cigar in his mouth and studied me in silence. My eyes strayed past him to an open doorway through which I could see a high, old-fashioned bathtub.

A moment later Jensen ushered Hilda Ghent into the cabin, closed the door. In person, Hilda was even prettier than her picture had shown, despite the shadow of fear in her brown eyes and the tiny crease of worry between her eyebrows.

She wore a green velveteen dress that made her look little and helpless. Her troubled eyes were almost as large as the cloth-covered ornamental buttons of her dress bodice.

"Is your name Hilda Ghent?" Captain Oley demanded brusquely.

Hilda's sudden intake of breath was clearly audible.

"My name is Mary Willems."

Oley frowned. "This man says he was hired by your uncle to find you."

The fear in her eyes grew more pronounced. "I have no uncle!"

"Look!" I snapped in sudden anger. "Cut that act! I'm only trying to do you a favor. Your uncle Kleber hired me to find you and give you two thousand dollars. Nobody's trying to hurt you. Tell them the truth!"

At the sound of Kleber's name, Hilda Ghent's face paled. Her lower lip trembled. She shook her head numbly.

"I—I have no uncle!" she cried. "I do not know anyone named Kleber!"

"Then why does he want me to give you two thousand dollars?" I demanded.

(Continued on page 258)

Letter to a P.O.W.

WILL YOU WRITE a letter to a Prisoner of War . . . tonight?

Perhaps he was left behind when Bataan fell. Perhaps he had to bail out over Germany. Anyway, he's an American, and he hasn't had a letter in a long, long time.

And when you sit down to write, tell *him* why you didn't buy your share of War Bonds last pay day—if you didn't.

"Dear Joe," you might say, "the old topcoat was getting kind of threadbare, so I . . ."

No, cross it out. Joe might not understand about the topcoat, especially if he's shivering in a damp Japanese cell.

Let's try again. "Dear Joe, I've been working pretty hard and haven't had a vacation in over a year, so . . ."

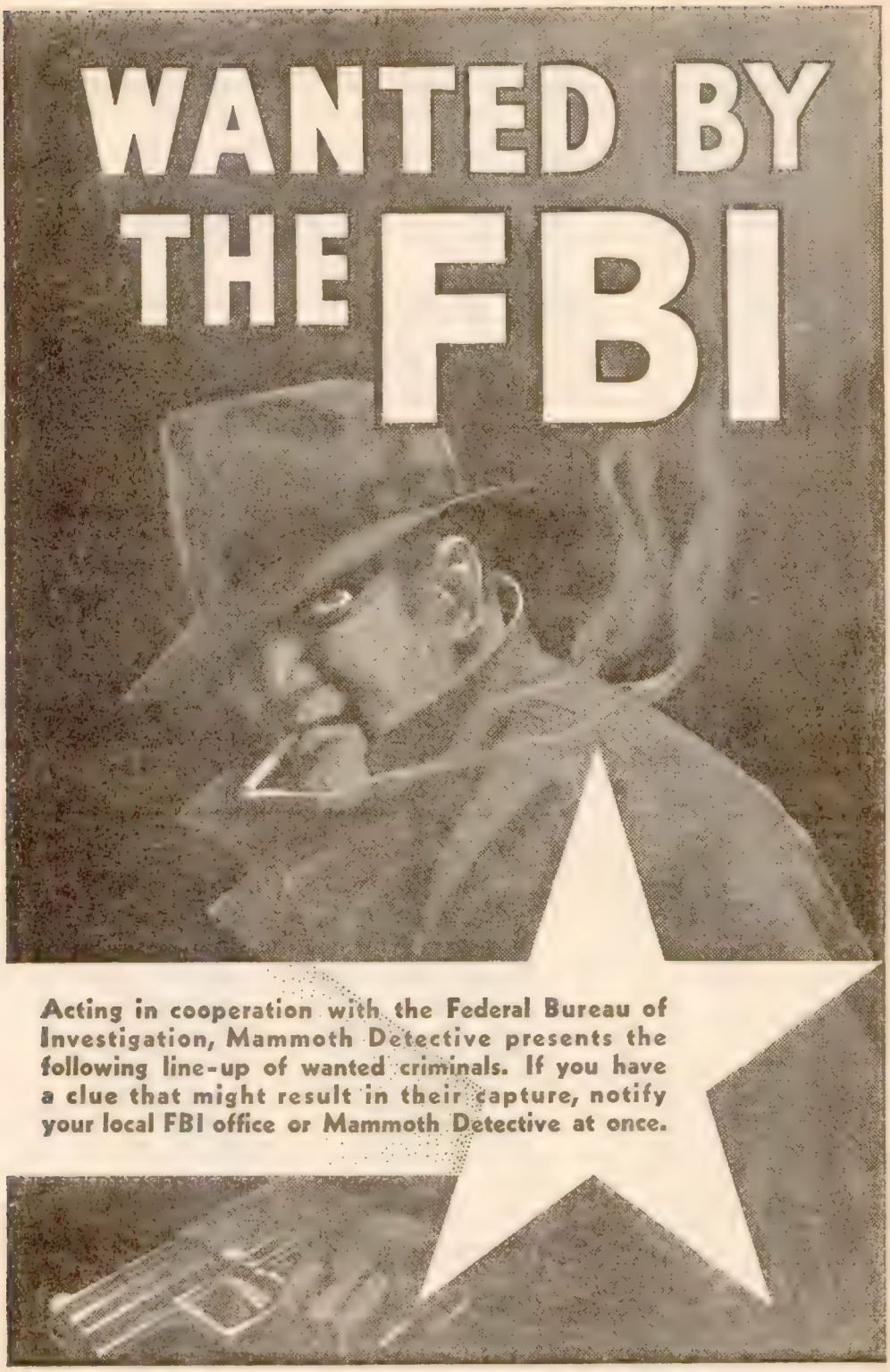
Better cross that out, too. They don't ever get vacations where Joe's staying.

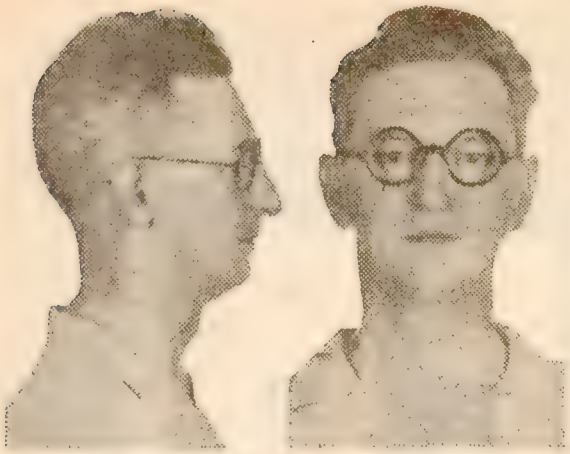
Well, what are you waiting for? Go ahead, write the letter to Joe. Try to write it, anyhow.

But if somehow you find you can't, will you do this? Will you up the amount you're putting into your Payroll Savings Plan—so that you'll be buying your share of War Bonds from here on in?

ZIFF-DAVIS PUBLISHING COMPANY

This advertisement prepared under the auspices of the War Advertising Council and the U. S. Treasury Department.


WANTED BY THE FBI
Acting in cooperation with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Mammoth Detective presents the following line-up of wanted criminals. If you have a clue that might result in their capture, notify your local FBI office or Mammoth Detective at once.



NATIONAL STOLEN PROPERTY ACT

WANTED

FRANK ARTHUR BRAUN, with aliases: G. E. BLISS, S. E. BLISS, ARTHUR BRAUN, F. A. BRAUN, FRANCIS ARTHER BRAUN, FRANCIS ARTHUR BRAUN, FRANK A. BRAUN, FRANK ARTHER BRAUN, F. A. BROUN, F. A. BROWN, FRANCIS A. BROWN, FRANCIS ARTHER BROWN, FRANK ARTHER BROWN, FRANK ARTHUR BROWN, FREDERICK ARTHER BROWN, FREDERICK ARTHUR BROWN, WILLIAM E. MACE, W. O. SANDERS.

DESCRIPTION

Age, 53 years, born March 24, 1889, Detroit, Michigan (cannot be verified); Height, 5 feet, 10¼ inches; Weight, 149 pounds; Eyes, brown; Hair, grey; Complexion, medium ruddy; Build, slender; Race, white; Nationality, American; Education, unknown; Occupation, accountant, former County Auditor; Scars and marks, burn scar right middle finger, flesh mole center forehead, brown mole back right shoulder; Peculiarities, wears horn rim glasses, occasionally wears mustache, talkative, nervous.

CRIMINAL RECORD

* As Frederick Arthur Brown, No. ——, arrested Bexar County, Texas, April 1, 1915; charge, forgery; disposition, 2 years.

As Frederick Arthur Brown, No. 37868, received State Penitentiary, Huntsville, Texas, July 12, 1915; crime, forgery; sentence, 2 years.

As Francis Arthur Braun, No. 1799, arrested Police Department, Houston, Texas, December 21, 1916; charge, forgery; disposition, 4 years.

As F. A. Broun, No. 40605, received State Penitentiary, Huntsville, Texas, January 30, 1917; crime, forgery and passing; sentence, 4 years.

As Frank A. Braun, No. 9700, arrested Police Department, Kansas City, Missouri, October 25, 1919; charge, investigation, suspicion embezzlement; disposition, released.

As Frank Arthur Braun, No. 6512, arrested Police Department, San Antonio, Texas, December 11, 1930; charge, forgery (7 cases); disposition, 4 cases dismissed, 2 years each on 3 cases, concurrent, February 16, 1931.

As Francis A. Brown, No. 66489, received State Penitentiary, Huntsville, Texas, April 16, 1931; crime, forgery; sentence, 3 two year sentences, concurrent.

As Frank Arthur Braun, No. 12659, arrested Police Department, Dallas, Texas, August 19, 1934; charge, theft over $50; disposition, released to Sheriff's Office, Comanche, Texas.

* As Frank Arthur Brown, No. ——, arrested Sheriff's Office, Comanche, Texas, August 23, 1934; charge, theft over $50; disposition, dismissed November 12, 1934.

* Represents notations unsupported by fingerprints.

NATIONAL STOLEN PROPERTY ACT

WANTED

MRS. ALBERT EARL WALKER, nee WILLIE CHARLETON WINGO, with aliases: MRS. FRED FOLEY, FRANCES HARMON, DOLLY JACKSON, BILLIE KAUFMAN, MRS. ROBERT D. KAUFMAN, MRS. ROBERT L. KAUFMAN, MRS. W. A. KING, MRS. WILLIAM A. KING, MRS. JIM B. LEASE, JR., MRS. GEORGE TAYLOR, MRS. ALBERT WALKER, BILLIE WALKER, BILLIE WINGO WALKER, BILLIE WINGO, BILLIE CHARLETON WINGO, WILLIE CHARLTON WINGO.

DESCRIPTION

Age, 36 years, born March 14, 1906, Cordell, Oklahoma; Height, 5 feet, 6¾ inches; Weight, 133 pounds; Eyes, brown; Hair, brown; Complexion, medium dark; Build, medium; Race, white; Nationality, American; Education, tenth grade; Occupation, transient, engages in fraudulent stock deals; Scars and marks, large mole right side of chin; Peculiarities, occasionally wears dark glasses, frequents trailer camps.

CRIMINAL RECORD

As Billie Walker, No. 20997, arrested Police Department, Dallas, Texas, April 24, 1941; charge, National Stolen Property Act; disposition, released to Sheriff's Office, Dallas, Texas.

As Billie Walker, No. 10898, arrested Sheriff's Office, Dallas, Texas, April 25, 1941; charge, material witness; disposition, released on bond of $2500.

As Billie Walker, No. 3387, arrested U. S. Marshal, Dallas, Texas, April 29, 1941; charge, National Stolen Property Act; disposition, released on bond of $5,000 April 30, 1941, forfeited.

UNLAWFUL FLIGHT TO AVOID PROSECUTION (MURDER)

WANTED

WILLIAM CORBILLA, with aliases: WILLIAM CORBELLA, WILLIAM CORBELLIA, BILL CORBILLA, PASIOT CORBILLA-CABANA, PASITO CORBILLA-CABANA, JOHN LOPEZ, BILL PAIEDO, MATEO TENONGA, "CALILLO," "THE BOGGIE-MAN."

DESCRIPTION

Age, 41 years, born October 16, 1901, Bangor, La Union, Philippine Islands; Height, 5 feet, 7 inches; Weight, 138 pounds; Eyes, brown; Hair, black; Complexion, olive; Build, medium; Race, brown; Nationality, Filipino; Occupation, bus boy, elevator boy, clerk in labor camp; Scars and marks, scar on back of right hand, pin mole on both corners of mouth; Peculiarities, wears rimless glasses.

CRIMINAL RECORD

As Bill Corbilla, No. 31977, arrested Police Department, Los Angeles, California, December 19, 1936; charge, suspicion (assault with deadly weapon with intent to commit murder); disposition, released to Sheriff's Office, Los Angeles, California, December 28, 1936.

As Bill Corbilla, No. 245375, received Sheriff's Office, Los Angeles, California, December 28, 1936; charge, assault with deadly weapon with intent to commit murder; disposition, one year County Jail; released January 21, 1938.

A complaint was filed before a United States Commissioner at San Francisco, California, on April 8, 1941, charging subject as William Corbilla with violation of the Unlawful Flight to Avoid Prosecution Statute, in that he did on or about June 25, 1939, move in interstate commerce to avoid prosecution for murder, which crime was committed at Watsonville, California, June 24, 1939.

NATIONAL STOLEN PROPERTY ACT

WANTED

ALFRED BANKER POST, with aliases: COLONEL HALE, COLONEL HALQUIRE, H. H. HALQUIRE, LIEUTENANT COLONEL H. H. HALQUIRE, HALE H. HALQUIRE, HALE HEATHERINGTON HALQUIRE, COLONEL HALE HEATHERINGTON HALQUIRE, COLONEL HOLQUIRE, H. H. HOLQUIRE, COL. H. H. HOLQUIRE, ALFRED E. LINDSAY, AL LINDSEY, ALFRED E. LINDSEY, ALFRED E. LINDSLEY, ALBERT E. LINDSLY, ALFRED DANKER POST, MR. RYAN, MR. WARD, "SENATOR BROWNING," "GRANDPOP."

DESCRIPTION

Age, 69 years, born February 26, 1874, New York, New York; Height, 5 feet, 9 inches; Weight, 250 pounds; Eyes, blue-gray; Hair, brown, graying; Complexion, ruddy; Build, heavy; Race, white; Nationality, American; Occupation, promoter, confidence man; Scars and marks, small indentation on lower lip caused by skin operation; Peculiarities, round, fat face, usually wears glasses, dresses neatly, often carries cane, sometimes walks with slight limp, smokes pipes and frequents pipe shops, suffers severely from arthritis.

CRIMINAL RECORD

* As Albert E. Lindsly, No. ——, arrested Police Department, New York, New York, June 14, 1918; charge, compulsory prostitution; disposition, dismissed November 11, 1918.

* As Alfred E. Lindsay, No. B-55126, arrested Police Department, New York, New York, February 28, 1922; charge, grand larceny; disposition, 5 to 10 years.

* As Alfred E. Lindsay, No. 74458, received Sing Sing Prison, Ossining New York, November 29, 1922; crime, grand larceny; sentence, 5 to 10 years. Transferred to Great Meadow Prison, Comstock, New York, February 6, 1923. Discharged February 24, 1928.

A complaint was filed before a U. S. Commissioner at Hagerstown, Maryland, on May 11, 1942, charging subject as H. H. Halquire with violation of the National Stolen Property Act in that he did, on or about July 20, 1940, August 5 and 16, 1940, and September 20 and 24, 1940, unlawfully transport and cause to be transported in interstate commerce from Hagerstown, Maryland, to Washington, D. C., and New York, New York, and to other points outside the State of Maryland, certain money in excess of $5,000 knowing same to have been stolen.

* Represents notations unsupported by fingerprints.

NATIONAL STOLEN PROPERTY ACT

WANTED

ROYAL GARFIELD HUNTER, with aliases: R. G. HUNTER, ROYAL G. HUNTER, R. JAEGER, R. J. JAEGER, ROYAL G. JAEGER.

DESCRIPTION

Age, 33 years, born April 26, 1909, Boston, Massachusetts; Height, 5 feet, 5 inches; Weight, 150 pounds; Eyes, brown; Hair, brown; Complexion, medium; Build, medium; Race, white; Nationality, American, English descent; Education, claims to have attended college for 2 years; Occupations, accountant, auditor, steel rigger, pipe coverer, British marine service; Scars and marks, reported to have tattoo on both arms including coiled serpent and English marine service insignia; Peculiarities, English accent.

CRIMINAL RECORD

(NONE KNOWN)

An indictment was returned by a Federal Grand Jury at Providence, Rhode Island, on March 29, 1940, charging subject as Royal G. Hunter with a violation of the National Stolen Property Act in that he did, on or about August 21, 1939, unlawfully transport in interstate commerce from Bristol, Rhode Island, to Worcester, Massachusetts, a certain security in the amount of $30,000 with intent to convert same to his own use, knowing it to have been falsely altered.

NATIONAL MOTOR VEHICLE THEFT ACT ALIEN ENEMY

WANTED

WALTER KORTEN KOCH, with aliases: WALTER KOCH, WALTER K. KOCH.

DESCRIPTION

Age, 27 years, born December 10, 1915, Barmen Langerfeld, Germany; Height, 5 feet, 10 inches; Weight, 155 pounds; Eyes, brown; Hair, brown, wavy; Complexion, ruddy, thin face; Build, medium; Race, white; Nationality, German alien; Occupation, farmer, welder; Marital Status, single; Scars and marks, none.

CRIMINAL RECORD

* As Walter Koch, No. ——, arrested military authorities, Ft. Francis E. Warren, Wyoming, December 7, 1941; charge, violation of 96th Article of War; disposition, escaped June 17, 1942.

On June 22, 1942, a presidential warrant was issued by the Attorney General of the United States at Washington, D. C., for the arrest of Walter Koch, an alien enemy deemed dangerous to the public peace and safety of the United States.

A complaint was filed before United States Commissioner at Cheyenne, Wyoming, on July 2, 1942, charging subject as Walter Korten Koch and others with violation of the National Motor Vehicle Theft Act, in that they did on or about June 10, 1942, unlawfully transport a stolen automobile in interstate commerce from Cheyenne, Wyoming, to Mayfield, Kentucky, knowing same to have been stolen.

An indictment was returned by a Federal Grand Jury at Joplin, Missouri, on September 16, 1942, charging subject as Walter Korten Koch and others with violation of the National Motor Vehicle Theft Act, in that they did on or about June 10, 1942, unlawfully transport a stolen automobile in interstate commerce from Cheyenne, Wyoming, to Vernon County Missouri, knowing same to have been stolen.

* Represents notation unsupported by fingerprint.

FEDERAL FIREARMS ACT

WANTED

EARL RAWSON WILLIAMS, with aliases: LIEUTENANT W. H. BROWN, H. S. EDWARDS, ROBERT FREEMAN, EARL WILLIAMS, EARL R. WILLIAMS, EARL RANSOM WILLIAMS, EABLE R. WILLIAMS, "THE TERMITE."

DESCRIPTION

Age, 43 years, born February 18, 1900, Winston-Salem, North Carolina; Height, 5 feet, 9¼ inches; Weight, 149 pounds; Eyes, gray-brown; Hair, brown; Complexion, sallow; Build, medium; Race, white; Nationality, American; Occupation, moving picture operator; Scars and marks, scar over left eye; Peculiarities, interested in antiques and novelty furniture.

CRIMINAL RECORD

As H. S. Edwards, No. 1077, arrested Police Department, Durham, North Carolina, November 27, 1928; charge, disposing of mortgaged property; disposition, released on payment of court costs, November 28, 1928.

As Earl Rawson Williams, No. 20325, arrested Police Department, Winston-Salem, North Carolina, December 22, 1940; charge, house-breaking, larceny and robbery (31 charges); disposition, 10 years and 6 to 10 years (2 charges), consecutive.

As Earl R. Williams, No. 38960-1, received Central Prison, Raleigh, North Carolina, January 9, 1941; crime, housebreaking, larceny and receiving; sentence, 16-20 years; transferred to State Prison Camp No. 605, Sanford, North Carolina, May 30, 1941; escaped June 9, 1941.

DESERTER

WANTED

CHARLES BURTON KUNZ, with aliases: CHARLES KUNZ, C. B. KUNZ, CHARLES B. KUNZ, CHUCK KUNZ LIEUTENANT CHARLES B. KUNZ.

DESCRIPTION

Age, 26 years, born January 25, 1917, Minneapolis, Minnesota; Height, 5 feet, 10½ inches; Weight, 142 pounds; Eyes, blue; Hair, sandy; Complexion, ruddy; Build, slender; Race, white; Nationality, American; Education, University graduate, majored in Chemistry and Physics; Occupation, physicist; Peculiarities, erect posture.

CRIMINAL RECORD

(NONE KNOWN)

Charles Burton Kunz, a Second Lieutenant in the United States Army, being absent without leave when his Company embarked for a foreign port, was ordered to board another Army transport to rejoin his Company which he failed to do. After being apprehended by military authorities on April 6, 1942, and again ordered to board an Army transport to rejoin his Company he "broke arrest," and deserted. He was formally charged as a deserter as of April 19, 1942. His apprehension is desired in order that he may be returned to military authorities .

IMPERSONATION SELECTIVE SERVICE

WANTED

JOHN CECIL WELSH, with aliases: JAMES C. ADAMS, JACK WELSH, JACK C. WELSH, JACK CECIL WELSH.

DESCRIPTION

Age, 28 years, born November 2, 1914, Vichy, Missouri; Height, 5 feet, 11 inches; Weight, 150 pounds; Eyes, blue; Hair, light brown; Complexion, fair; Build, slender; Race, white; Nationality, American; Education, high school, 1 year trade school; Occupation, truck driver, filling station attendant, chicken hatchery worker; Scars and marks, scar right hand, scar on forehead, teeth bad, one front tooth missing; Peculiarities, occasionally wears small mustache, uses typewriter, adept at hand printing, good penman, talks about aviation, piano player.

CRIMINAL RECORD

As Jack C. Welsh, No. F-1990, arrested State Highway Patrol, Jefferson City, Missouri, December 12, 1940; charge, car theft; disposition, released.

An indictment was returned by a Federal Grand Jury at Kansas City, Missouri, on June 4, 1943, charging subject with violation of the Federal Impersonation Statute in that he did on or about April 14, 1942, at Kansas City, Missouri, unlawfully obtain certain money by falsely assuming and pretending to be an officer of the U. S. Government.

An indictment in two counts was returned by a Federal Grand Jury at Kansas City, Missouri, on June 4, 1943, charging subject with violation of the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940 in that he unlawfully failed to comply with the provisions thereof.

NATIONAL MOTOR VEHICLE THEFT ACT

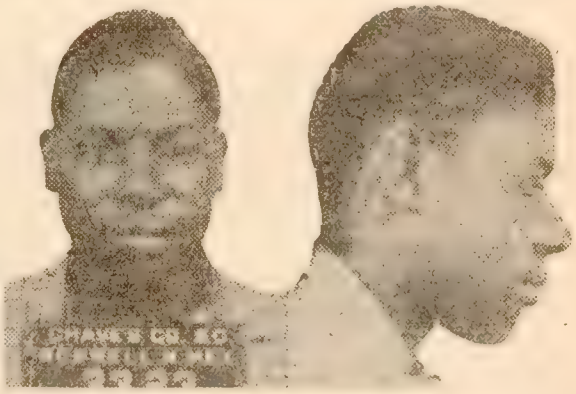
WANTED

LEON WEBB

DESCRIPTION

Age, 26 years, born April 17, 1917, Waco, Texas; Height, 5 feet, 7 inches; Weight, 140 pounds; Eyes, dark brown; Hair, black; Complexion, black; Build, medium; Race, negro; Nationality, American; Occupation, laborer; Scars and marks, scar left side of forehead.

As Leon Webb, No. 1987, arrested Police Department, Roswell, New Mexico, October 28, 1939; charge, assault and battery; disposition, fined $10 and cost October 30, 1939.



CRIMINAL RECORD

As Leon Webb, No. 3323, arrested Sheriff's Office, Roswell, New Mexico, April 7, 1940; charge, assault with dangerous weapon; disposition, released to Police Department.

* As Leon Webb, No. 2087, arrested Police Department, Roswell, New Mexico, April 8, 1940; charge, fighting; disposition, fined $10 April 11, 1940.

An indictment was returned by a Federal Grand Jury at Santa Fe, New Mexico, on March 7, 1941, charging subject as Leon Webb, with violation of the National Motor Vehicle Theft Act in that he did, on or about September 1, 1940, unlawfully transport an automobile in interstate commerce from Prescott, Arizona, to Roswell, New Mexico, knowing it to have been stolen.

* Represents notation unsupported by fingerprints.

CONDITIONAL RELEASE VIOLATOR

WANTED

FRED MACK ANDERSON, with aliases: F. M. ANDERSON, FRED ANDERSON, FRED M. ANDERSON, FREDERICK ANDERSON, JACK DAILEY, JOHN W. DAILEY, JACK DAILY, JOE DAILY, JOHN W. DAILY, JACK DALEY, JACK V. DALEY, JOE V. DALEY, JOSEPH V. DALEY, JOE DALY, JOHN DALY, JACK DOYLE, GEORGE FISHER, GEORGE M. FISHER, GEORGE N. FISHER, JOE REYNOLD, JOE REYNOLDS.

DESCRIPTION

Age, 67 years, born March 17, 1876, Panora, Iowa (cannot be verified); Height, 5 feet, 10 inches; Weight, 154 pounds; Eyes, blue; Hair, medium chestnut, graying, receding at front; Complexion, sallow; Build, medium; Race, white; Nationality, American; Occupation, itinerant tool grinder, cook, barber, waiter, sheet metal worker; Scars and marks, blue tattoo of monument inner left forearm with indistinct lettering at base, cut scar base left thumb, large scar left hip, cut scar below tip right shoulder, scar left nostril, right knee crooked, large wide nose with hook, border of ears crimped, face wrinkled; Peculiarities, formerly traveled as itinerant tool grinder accompanied by trained goat and pig, talkative, believed in poor health.

CRIMINAL RECORD

* As F. M. Anderson, No. ——, arrested Los Angeles County, California, January, 1902; charge, burglary, first degree; disposition, 10 years.

As F. M. Anderson, No. 19433, received State Penitentiary, San Quentin, California, February 19, 1902; crime, burglary; sentence, 10 years, discharged August 17, 1908.

As Joe Reynolds, No. 3188, arrested Police Department, Kansas City, Missouri, June 20, 1909; charge, burglary; disposition, released June 20, 1909.

* As Fred Anderson, No. ——, arrested Jackson County, Missouri, March, 1911; charge, sodomy; disposition, 10 years.

As Fred Anderson, No. 12398, received State Penitentiary, Jefferson City, Missouri, March 31, 1911; crime, sodomy; sentence, 10 years, paroled June 26, 1917.

As John W. Daily, No. 8735, arrested Police Department, Detroit, Michigan, July 11, 1917; charge, counterfeiting; disposition, 10 years and $5,000 fine.

* As John W. Daily, No. 12370, received U.S. Penitentiary, Leavenworth, Kansas, January 27, 1918; crime, counterfeiting; sentence 10 years, discharged October 27, 1924.

* As Jack V. Daley, No. ——, arrested Sheriff's Office, Maquoketa, Iowa, May 2, 1925; charge, obscene mail; disposition, lodged County Jail, Maquoketa, Iowa; transferred to County Jail, Dubuque, Iowa, May 7, 1925; 3 years.

As Joseph V. Daley, No. 24389, received U.S. Penitentiary, Leavenworth, Kansas, December 5, 1925; crime, violation Postal Laws; sentence, 3 years; transferred to U.S. Penitentiary, McNeil Island, Washington, as No. 5874, October 9, 1926; released March 27, 1928.

As Jack Doyle, No. 23, arrested Sheriff's Office, Toledo, Iowa, September 22, 1928; charge, extortion; disposition, 5 years.

As Jack Daley, No. 14164, received State Penitentiary, Fort Madison, Iowa, November 24, 1928; crime, extortion; sentence, 5 years, released February 25, 1932.

As Joe Reynolds, No. 691, arrested Police Department, Waterloo, Iowa, June 14, 1932; charge, sodomy; disposition, 6 months.

As George M. Fisher, No. ——, arrested Sheriff's Office, Weatherford, Texas, July 6, 1935; charge, kidnaping; disposition, transferred as George Fisher, No. 8147 to Sheriff's Office, Sapulpa, Oklahoma, July 7, 1935; transferred as George M. Fisher, No. 11989, to Sheriff's Office, Tulsa, Oklahoma, July 9, 1935; 7 years.

As George N. Fisher, No. 47936, received U.S. Penitentiary, Leavenworth, Kansas, November 23, 1935; crime, kidnaping; sentence, 7 years; transferred to U.S. Penitentiary, Alcatraz, California, as No. 397-AZ, July 6, 1937; transferred to U.S. Penitentiary, Leavenworth, Kansas, as No. 47936, January 11, 1940; conditionally released January 8, 1941.

Subject as George M. Fisher was sentenced on November 12, 1935, in the U.S. District Court, Miami, Oklahoma, to serve 7 years in a Federal Penitentiary for violation of the Federal Kidnaping Statute. On January 8, 1941, subject was conditionally released from the U.S. Penitentiary, Leavenworth, Kansas, and on March 28, 1941, a conditional release violator's warrant for his arrest was issued by the U.S. Board of Parole, Washington, D. C., charging him with violating the conditions of his release.

* Represents notations unsupported by fingerprints.

CONDITIONAL RELEASE VIOLATOR

WANTED

THOMAS JOHNSON, with aliases: BUDDY JOHNSON, THOMAS EARL JOHNSON, TOM JOHNSON, THOMAS WALKER, THOMAS WALLACE, THOMAS WALTERS.

DESCRIPTION

Age, about 32 years (date and place of birth unknown); Height, 5 feet, 10 inches; Weight, 158 pounds; Eyes, dark maroon; Hair, black, curly; Teeth, regular; Complexion, medium dark brown; Build, medium; Race, Negro; Nationality, American; Occupations, chauffeur, truck driver, drummer, farm worker, undertaker's helper, janitor; Scars and marks, gallstone operation scar; 8 warts back of right elbow; mole over upper lip; Peculiarities, wears eyeglasses occasionally; extremely fond of automobiles.

CRIMINAL RECORD

* As Thomas Johnson, No. 2288, arrested Police Department, Camden, New Jersey, November 12, 1929, charge, theft of automobile; disposition, 1 year 6 months State Penitentiary.

On January 6, 1938, Thomas Johnson entered a plea of guilty in the Federal Court at Wilmington, Delaware, and was sentenced to serve two years in the United States Northeastern Penitentiary, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, for violation of the National Motor Vehicle Theft Act. He was conditionally released from this institution on August 14, 1939. A warrant for his arrest as a Conditional Release Violator was issued by the United States Board of Parole on January 3, 1940, charging violation of the conditions of his release by failure to contact his designated probation officer and submit reports.

* Represents notations unsupported by fingerprints.

CONDITIONAL RELEASE VIOLATOR SELECTIVE SERVICE

WANTED

CONLY RANDOLPH AYERS, with aliases: CONLEY AYERS, CONNELLEY AYERS, CONNELLY AYERS, JACK AYERS, CONLEY AYRES, CONNELLY AYRES, JACK AYRES, JACK RICHARD AYRES, VERNE BROWN, JOE GEBSON, JOE GIBSON, JOE GOBSON, JACK ROYCE, JACK WELCH.

DESCRIPTION

Age, 38 years, born June 13, 1905, Elmira Township, Benzie County, Michigan; Height, 5 feet, 8 inches; Weight, 2[illegible] pounds; Eyes, gray; Hair, dark brown; Complexion, medium; Build, stout; Race, white; Nationality, American; Education, [illegible] grade; Occupation, prospector, electrician, lineman, painter, miner; Scars and marks, tattoo on left forearm of arrow piercing heart, tattoo on right forearm clasped hands surrounded by leaves across an American flag, word "Friendship," appendectomy scar, left middle finger tip scarred; Peculiarities, large double chin, eyebrows grown together, high forehead, receding hairline, defective vision and may be wearing glasses.

CRIMINAL RECORD

* As Conley Ayers, No. ——, arrested Sheriff's Office, Grand Traverse County, Michigan, August 30, 1926; charge, forgery; disposition, 2 to 14 years State Reformatory.

As Conley Ayers, No. 16178, received State Reformatory, Ionia, Michigan, September 17, 1926; crime, forgery; sentence, 2 to 14 years, paroled June 1, 1928, parole violated May 10, 1929.

* As Connelly Ayres, No. [illegible], arrested Sheriff's Office, Emmet County, Michigan, April 23, 1929, charge, forgery; disposition, 14 to 28 years, May 10, 1929, subsequently changed to 7 to 21 years.

As Connelly Ayres, No. 4777, received State House of Correction and Branch Prison, Marquette, Michigan, May 14, 1929; crime, forgery; sentence, 14 to 28 years, changed to 7 to 21 years and remainder 2 to 14 years sentence No. 16498, released to State Prison, Jackson, Michigan.

As Conley Ayers, No. 25864, received State Prison, Jackson, Michigan, November 21, 1929; crime, forgery; sentence, 2 to 14 years, discharged June 16, 1932, and recommitted July 26, 1932, under No. 32308 to serve 7 to 21 years, paroled January 20, 1938.

As Jack Ayres, No. 2134, arrested U.S. Marshal, Juneau, Alaska, December 21, 1938; charge, assault with deadly weapon; disposition, 20 months, February 19, 1940.

As Jack Ayres, No. 14639, received U.S. Penitentiary, McNeil Island, Washington, March 6, 1940; crime, assault with a dangerous weapon; sentence, 20 months, conditionally released June 20, 1941.

Subject as Jack Ayers, was sentenced on February 19, 1940, in the U.S. District Court, Juneau, Alaska, to serve 20 months in a Federal penitentiary for assault with a dangerous weapon. On June 20, 1941, subject was conditionally released from the U.S. Penitentiary, McNeil Island, Washington, and on September 2, 1941, a conditional release violator's warrant for his arrest was issued by the U.S. Board of Parole, Washington, D. C., charging him with violation of the conditions of his release.

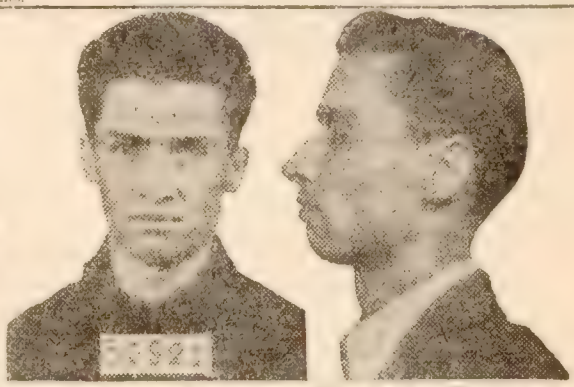
A complaint was filed before a U.S. Commissioner at Juneau, Alaska, on March 20, 1943, charging subject with violation of the Selective Service Act in that he failed to comply with the provisions thereof.

* Represents notations unsupported by fingerprints.

CONDITIONAL RELEASE VIOLATOR SELECTIVE SERVICE

WANTED

OWEN WARREN JONES, with aliases: JACK JONES, O. W. JONES, OWEN JONES, OWEN J. JONES, OWEN R. JONES, OWEN W. JONES, OWEN WALKER JONES, OWEN WALLEY JONES, OWEN WALTER JONES, WALLEY JONES, WALLEY JONES, WALLY JONES, CLIFFORD NASH.



DESCRIPTION

Age, 38 years, born August 14, 1905, Cox Mills, West Virginia; Height, 5 feet, 6¼ inches; Weight, 131 pounds; Eyes, green; Hair, black; Complexion, dark; Build, slender; Race, white; Nationality, American; Education, attended [illegible] grade school, Occupation, restaurant operator, rooming house operator, waiter, farmer, procurer, pool room operator, plumber, electrical worker, Scars and marks, two cut scars over right eye, cut scar tip left ring finger.

CRIMINAL RECORD

As O. W. Jones, No. 9945, arrested U.S. Marshal, Baltimore, Maryland, August 31, 1936; charge, White Slave Traffic Act; disposition, released to U.S. Marshal, Clarksburg, West Virginia.

As Owen Walter Jones, No. ——, arrested U.S. Marshal, Clarksburg, West Virginia, September 12, 1936; charge, White Slave Traffic Act, bribery and intimidation of government witness; disposition, five years and $5,000 for White Slave Traffic Act, one year for intimidation of government witness (consecutive).

As Walley Jones, No. [illegible], received U.S. Northeastern Penitentiary, Lewisburg, Pennsylvania, December 29, 1936; crime, White Slave Traffic Act, intimidation of government witness; sentence, $5,000 fine and six years, transferred to U.S. Penitentiary, Atlanta, Georgia.

As Walley Jones, No. 36821, received U.S. Penitentiary, Atlanta, Georgia, May 5, 1937; crime, White Slave Traffic Act, intimidation of government witness; sentence, six years; conditionally released May 7, 1941.

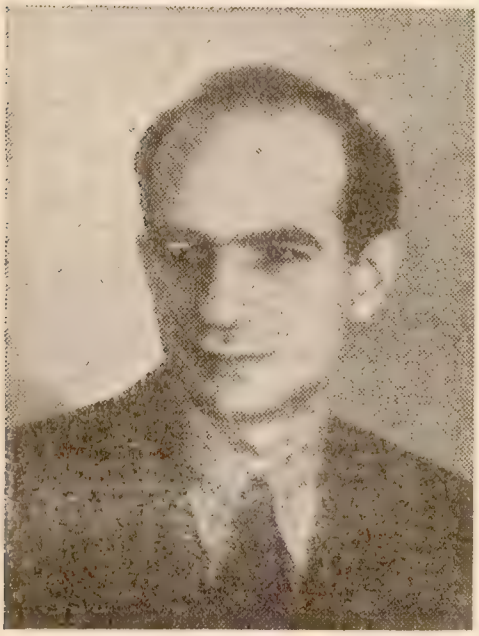
As Owen W. Jones, No. AJ-343, arrested Constable's Office, Glenville, West Virginia, July 21, 1941; charge, no operator's license; disposition, fined $10 and $4.60 cost; released July 22, 1941.

As Clifford Nash, No. 6413, arrested Police Department, Steubenville, Ohio, September 27, 1942; charge, investigation (rape); disposition, released on $1500 bond (forfeited).

On December 17, 1936, subject as Walley Jones was sentenced in the U.S. District Court, Elkins, West Virginia, to serve six years in a Federal penitentiary for violation of the White Slave Traffic Act and interfering with a government witness. On May 7, 1941, he was conditionally released from the U.S. Penitentiary, Atlanta, Georgia. A conditional release violator's warrant for his arrest was issued by the U.S. Board of Parole, Washington, D. C., on August 11, 1941, charging him with violating the conditions of his release.

A complaint was filed before a United States Commissioner at Parkersburg, West Virginia, on June 3, 1943, charging subject as Owen Warren Jones with violation of the Selective Service Act, in that he failed to report for a physical examination.

Presenting The Author



BRUNO FISCHER

ON A Saturday afternoon seven years ago a group of newspapermen were brooding over how to make a living free from city editors and deadlines. I was one of them. Somebody mentioned that he had once written several yarns for detective magazines, but somehow had not kept it up.

I was vaguely interested. In the ten years since I'd got out of high school, I'd done almost every kind of writing for a living. I'd been a rewrite man, a sports writer, a police reporter. I'd written book reviews and poems and articles on economic and political subjects. I'd edited weekly newspapers and a couple of magazines. I'd had a number of short stories printed in highbrow magazines which paid off mostly in glory. But all I knew about detective stories was that a lot of people read them. I didn't.

On the way home I bought a number of current detective magazines. When I reached home I announced to Ruth, my wife, that behold, she was henceforth married to a detective story writer. The idea appealed to her, if it could pay the bills and give her husband rational working hours.

For a solid week I steeped myself in detective fiction. Then I wrote a story. It didn't sell. I wrote another. It sold. So did nearly all the rest of the nearly three million words I've written since then. In a few months I quit my job and my fate was sealed.

In a fit of romanticism I signed my stories with a pseudonym: Russell Gray. The result was that I practically lost my identity. I became Russell Gray almost everywhere except among my family and close friends.

Last year I determined to regain my identity. Once again I'm Bruno Fischer, although occasionally I still sign a story Russell Gray. It feels like being reborn when I walk into an editor's office these days and am greeted by my real name.

During my seven years of detective story writing, I've done two novels. The first, *So Much Blood,* was a moderate success; it was forgotten two months after publication. The second is *Murder Wears a Skirt.* It was written under the merciless goading of my agent and with gratifying promptness was bought by *Mammoth Detective.*

That satisfied me, but one of the few nice things about being a writer is that sometimes startlingly pleasant things happen to stories. *Murder Wears a Skirt* kept rolling. William Morrow & Co. almost as promptly accepted the novel for book publication. As a book it will be titled *The Hornet's Nest.* And a few weeks later the DETECTIVE BOOK CLUB chose it as the monthly selection for its eighty thousand or so readers. Sometimes it almost pays to be a writer.

For other reasons, my family thinks so. Adam, aged four, boasts to his friends that they haven't fathers who are home all day. He has a firm belief that it's because other children's fathers don't possess typewriters. Nora, aged one, is completely flabbergasted when I am away from home for a whole day. In her limited experience, both parents' place is eternally by her side.

My friends keep telling me what a snap free-lance writing must be. Obviously they're not writers. It's true I'm my own boss, but that's often the trouble. The toughest nut any writer has to crack is the self-discipline which keeps him at his desk.

And you're not through when you leave your typewriter. Often, when a story isn't going well or plots refuse to come, I'm not fit for human society. That's when my wife and kids scurry into corners when I appear. And when Ruth finds me tossing sleeplessly at night, she knows it is plot trouble

(Concluded on page 261)

the READER'S VERDICT

SHE SHOULD HAVE KNOWN!

Sirs:

I have read *Fantastic Adventures* and *Amazing Stories* for over a year. Needless to say, I really enjoy them. A few days ago, I bought a copy of MAMMOTH DETECTIVE. Was I pleased! It really hit the spot. I read a lot of detective stories and your magazine is really tops. I can't see why I didn't buy it sooner. I should have known that any Ziff-Davis magazine would have to be good.

The issue I bought was the February one. "Murder Wears a Halo" was simply wonderfully written. It really kept me guessing. Does John Evans write for you all along? I sure hope he does. His style is very concise. I liked the sly references to Amazing and Mammoth magazines in the story. I couldn't put the magazine down until I had finished "Murder Wears a Halo." Believe me, from now on I am a constant reader of your three super publications.

Do you publish any other magazines besides the three named above?

Miss Betty King,
504 West 33rd Street,
Los Angeles 7, Calif.

As can be judged by the letters that follow yours, Betty, "Murder Wears a Halo" proved to be the most popular detective novel we've yet presented. It is the first story John Evans sent to us and we sincerely hope it will not be the last. . . . Besides the three fiction magazines you named above, Ziff-Davis also publishes Flying, Popular Photography, *and* Radio News—*all leaders in their fields.—Ed.*

WHAT EVIDENCE IS CIRCUMSTANTIAL?

Sirs:

After reading your latest issue of MAMMOTH DETECTIVE, I felt it necessary to write to you. I think that your feature story was one of the best I have ever read, but there are certain things about that story which forced me to write this letter. The story dealt at some length with circumstantial evidence, and the lawyer claimed that nothing was a fact until proven so; he also stated that since no one had seen Don Hearn fire the fatal shot, the State's case was based solely on circumstantial evidence. Now here is where the author slipped up, in my estimation at least. He proved that Paul Raynor had the motive, the means and the opportunity, but that no one had actually seen him fire the shot; therefore, what had held true for Hearn also held true for Raynor; since no one had seen Raynor fire the fatal shot, he also was a victim of circumstantial evidence. . . .

You asked the readers to comment about one other story in the issue—the story about double jeopardy. Here is my comment: I do not see why a man should go on trial twice for the same offense. In the story itself, I think the man was perfectly right when he committed the murder after suffering for a crime he had not committed. In other words, I was completely in sympathy with the murderer as soon as I had finished the story.

Walter Lang,
3050 Third Avenue,
Bronx 56, New York.

As we, the editors, saw it, Hearn's lawyer, in "Murder Wears a Halo," was not satisfied with the account Hearn gave him at the time he was hired to defend Loa Santley. Actually, the lawyer had found out much of the evidence that tied Raynor to the crime before Hearn gave his confession in court. That evidence did not tie in with Hearn's confession, as given; so the lawyer kept after the truth. Raynor's confession fitted every fact the lawyer had gathered—fitted it so perfectly that circumstantial evidence no longer described what turned out to be the truth. . . . Most readers disagreed with your conclusions on the story based on double jeopardy—saying (and rightly so) that murder is never justified.—Ed.

ATTENTION: ERLE STANLEY GARDNER

Sirs:

I have just finished reading the February copy of your swell-elegant magazine, and can contain myself no longer.

This issue was undoubtedly the finest issue of any twenty-five cent magazine I ever saw. Keep all your issues up to this standard and you will never be able to get the necessary paper. In fact, that is what alarms me most; I might not be able to get my copy if you don't slow down on improvements.

I would like to express my heartiest wishes for a very long life to John Evans whose "Murder Wears a Halo" is about the best detective yarn of any size, description, price or anything

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else I believe I have ever read. Mr. E. S. Gardner has someone to really worry about in Mr. Overend. I hope there will be many more of Mr. Évans' yarns, and that the rest of them are at least half as good. I don't believe that anyone could do much better than that for quite a while. It isn't every day that you find a story of that calibre.

I would like a few longer stories, as the short-shorts are just that, and who wants to just get started when the end pops up? Leave that kind of story for those who want them, but leave them out of my issues.

But definitely, do by all means leave the back covers just as they are. What would we do without that to worry us? Most of the people who read detective stories want to be a "Wilbur Peddie," or something, anyhow.

Joe Hargus.
1444 North Denver,
Tulsa 6, Okla.

ETCHED!

Sirs:

Dust off a twenty-four carat halo for John Evans! "Murder Wears a Halo" was *etched*, not merely written. Prediction: the Hollywood movie makers are too smart to pass up a story as good as this one.

A. E. Martin,
411 Monroe Avenue,
East Alton, Ill.

Our authors—and we—are always pleased to receive feelers from Hollywood on the stories to appear in these pages!—Ed.

THE END

NOBODY'S DIAMONDS

(Continued from page 247)

She turned in sudden panic to Captain Oley. "This man is lying! I do not know him! I do not know what he is talking about! Please let me go!"

Oley scowled, then nodded. "Go on. I'll talk to you later!"

HILDA GHENT turned quickly to the door and hurried out in obvious relief. I chewed my underlip. This thing that I'd walked into was getting screwier by the minute. There were too many angles I didn't understand.

But one thing puzzled me more than the rest. Hilda Ghent, unless she was a damned clever actress, seemed to have

been speaking the truth when she claimed she didn't know what I was talking about. Her fear of me had obviously been genuine. I was ready to believe that Kleber had lied when he said he was here uncle.

"Why did you kill that man Munger?"

As I heard Captain Oley's words, spoken with grim certainty, my back stiffened as if an electric charge had been shot into my spine.

"Listen," I snapped, "I'm just as dumb as you are about that killing. I know this much: Munger is a rat, a guy known to the cops in St. Louis as a cheap gunman. You can check on that. And his pal——"

I saw the blur of movement at the dark sliding window, threw myself to the floor. There was the blast of a gun and the splatter of wood chips as the slug ripped into the wall above me.

I heard the captain's angry bellow and Jensen's startled exclamation. When I glanced at the window, the face was gone. But I had caught a brief glimpse of it just before the shot. I knew who had tried to kill me: Nucky Horton!

"Out on the hurricane, quick!" It was Oley, shouting an order to Jensen.

I scrambled to my feet as Jensen rushed to the door. As he opened the door, I saw men pouring out of cabins in the passageway. They followed Jensen around the bend of the corridor.

Captain Oley jumped to his desk, pulled out a heavy revolver from a drawer. He turned to me, snapped, "You stay here till we get that man!"

He pulled the door shut after him and I heard the click of the lock. I pivoted, leaped to the bathroom door. A quick glance showed me there was no window, only a small ventilator near the ceiling, no more than twelve inches in width and height. No escape that way. Maybe the door wasn't locked.

I turned back to the cabin, tried the door without hope. It was locked. I moved swiftly to the window beside Oley's bunk, drew back as I saw shadows hurrying excitedly in every direction on the hurricane deck.

"He ran below to the fo'c's'le!" someone shouted.

There was a quick scurry of blurred shadows towards the stern.

"Some of you men go down the companionway forward!" It was Captain Oley's voice.

A MOMENT later the hurricane deck was deserted. From below I could hear the excited shouts of the rivermen. In the excitement Oley must have forgotten about his window. He hadn't thought of leaving a guard there. I pulled myself through the window.

On the hurricane deck, I slipped into the corridor. I remembered the door Jensen had gone to when he had summoned Hilda Ghent to the captain. My heart was pounding in fast rhythm as I rapped on Hilda's door. There was no answer. I had been afraid of that. Hilda had evidently joined the searching rivermen. The door was locked.

My stomach turned into a cold vacuum as I heard the clatter of feet out on the deck. Some of the men were returning to search the middle deck. The pounding feet came nearer. They were just outside the passageway door now.

There was no escape that way. It was too late to seek an unlocked cabin door. The men would be in the passageway in a couple of seconds. I sucked in my breath in sudden momentary relief as I saw the head of another companionway at the forward end of the passageway.

I pounded down the corridor, reached the top step, and heard the angry roar behind me.

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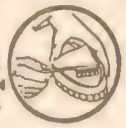

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"There he goes!"

I leaped down the narrow companionway three steps at a time. My breath was a painful knot in my throat. Behind me I heard the voice drawing nearer.

A door at the foot of the companionway opened on the starboard side, near the bow. The darkness of the deck was a momentary refuge. I leaped around the corner of the deckhouse, at the prow, moved quickly to the port side. A shout went up behind me as my pursuers saw me turn the corner.

My feet stumbled over something on the deck. I caught my balance on the portside rail, stooped and found the thing I had stumbled over. I lifted it, not sure what I intended doing with it. It was a steel crowbar, tapering at one end and thick at the opposite end. It must have weighed thirty or forty pounds.

The sound of the approaching voices around the deckhouse acted like a needle-prick to my befogged mind. I raised the crowbar over my head, heaved it out as far as I could towards the churning water below. I heard the splash as I leaped swiftly and silently up a stairway towards the deck above.

I saw the shadowy figures rush to the railing, heard their jumbled voices:

"He's jumped overside!"

"There he goes!"

"No, that's a log!"

"He jumped overside, didn't he!"

"Sure, he did! We'll never get him now!"

"We'll get him all right!" I recognized Captain Oley's voice. "At least the Coast Guard will get him! I've got his papers showing who he is. He'll never get away!"

"What about the other fellow? The guy that fired that shot into your cabin, Cap?"

There was a moment's silence, then the captain's voice: "Must be Dono-

van's pal. Guess he tried to kill me. And he's still aboard!"

"What we gonna do about him?"

"Nothing we can do. He must be one of the new deck hands I hired in St. Louis, but there's no way of knowing which one. There's half a dozen of 'em, not counting the one that was murdered. Well, we'll just leave that up to the Coast Guard when we pass the cutter tomorrow. We've had enough trouble for one night. You men on watch, go back to your work. You other fellows better get some sleep. We've got a tough day ahead."

I MOVED away from the railing as I heard the shuffle of footsteps below. My heart was still beating fast as I slipped along the deck towards the stern. For the moment, I was safe. They were convinced I had jumped overboard and the search for me on the riverboat would be discontinued, at least until morning.

But that didn't give me much time. In the morning, the Coast Guard would take up the search for me as the murderer of Chippy Munger. As things stood, there was no way I could disprove it.

At the door of the passage to Hilda Ghent's cabin, I prayed mutely that the corridor would be empty. It wasn't. But that was even better. Hilda Ghent was in front of her door, turning a key in the lock.

She gasped as she saw me, pushed her door open quickly. I leaped across the intervening space, threw my shoulder against the door as she started to slam it shut.

I wedged the door open, saw the pulse in her throat as she opened her mouth to scream. My hand shot, closed over her mouth. I pushed her back into the dark cabin, slammed the door shut. Holding my left hand over her mouth as

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Correspondence CORNER

THIS feature will be discontinued for the duration in the interests of the safety of our armed forces and of national security.

Presenting the Author
(Concluded from page 256)

again, more to be dreaded, during its duration, than a virulent disease—which, come to think of it, is probably what it is.

Yet there are compensations. When a story is going well—usually one which will turn out to be liked by editors, though not always—I hardly take time to bolt my food. And there is nothing like the satisfaction of reading something of your own in print and thinking: Say, that isn't bad at all! (Mostly, I regret to confess, it's the other way around.) If I think I'm rather useless these war days—until such a time as Uncle Sam measures me for a suit of olive-drab—I take some little satisfaction in the fact that very many soldiers and sailors and marines and war workers take their relaxation by reading words that I have written.

Finally, I like the idea of being footloose with my family. A writer's office is his typewriter, which can be set up anywhere. These days you can't do much traveling, so for the time being we're settled on a hill overlooking the Hudson in Croton, New York.—*Bruno Fischer.*

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she struggled to free herself, I groped along the wall with my right hand till I found the light switch, clicked it. In the light, I could see the terror in her eyes.

"Don't be frightened!" I murmured into her ear. "I'm not here to hurt you!"

She continued to struggle.

"Be reasonable," I pleaded. "You have nothing to lose by listening to me! If I wanted to kill you, I could do it now without making you listen!"

Her struggles weakened only slightly, but I could see by her eyes that she was thinking my statement over.

"I know you're in trouble, Hilda," I said quickly. "So am I. They think I killed Munger. I didn't. I had no reason to. If you'll listen to me, we can help each other. Will you listen?"

She was still for a moment. Finally, she nodded. I took my hand away from her mouth, but tensed, ready to clap it over her lips again if she gave the slightest indication she would scream.

She didn't scream, but she backed away from me.

"What—what do you want?" she gasped. "Why do you not let me alone?"

There was only the slightest hint of a foreign accent in her voice.

"Why did you tell Captain Oley that Kleber isn't your uncle?"

"He is not my uncle!" she cried.

"Then he was lying when he hired me to find you and give you two thousand dollars?"

"Yes, yes! He was lying! I hate him! He has brought me only sorrow!" Her voice was a frightened whisper. I could see that her fear of me was returning in a rush.

I said quickly, "Believe me, Hilda, I don't know what this is all about. I only know this: they think I killed Munger. If you don't tell me what this is all about, I'll fry in the chair sure as I'm standing here in front of you. You

don't have a thing to lose by telling me the truth. Why did you run away from Kleber? What does he want with you?"

I COULD see that she wanted to believe me. She was in some kind of deep trouble. She was alone and friendless. She desperately wanted a friend, someone to help her.

Presently she murmured, "He—he wants to kill me! He wants to kill me, like he killed my father!"

My face must have looked startled. "Kleber killed your father!"

She nodded numbly.

"Your father shot himself," I protested.

"That is what the police said. But I know it isn't true. Kleber killed my father."

"Why?"

She shook her head. "I can't tell you."

"What about Munger and Horton?" I asked. "What was their interest in you?"

"Munger? Horton? I do not know them."

"Munger is the man who was murdered. Horton is his pal. Did you know they took jobs on this tub so they could follow you? Why?"

There was a shuffle of feet outside in the passageway, then the sound of cabin doors opening and closing. I gestured to Hilda to remain quiet. Her large brown eyes were clouded and I could see that she hadn't quite made up her mind about me. But she remained silent. Presently the sounds in the corridor ceased.

"Well?" I asked.

Hilda sat down at the edge of her bunk, rested her chin in the palms of her hands, and her elbows on her knees. She stared moodily in front of her, eyes troubled. Her face reflected her inner struggle about me.

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As I waited, I glanced around the cabin. It was about the size of the captain's, except that there was no adjoining bathrooms. There was a small window, its shade drawn, above the bunk. At one side stood a large metal wardrobe locker.

When Hilda finally looked up, I knew by her frank eyes that she had decided to take me into her confidence.

"My father," she murmured, "was a diamond cutter in Amsterdam before the war. One of his clients was Jan Van Den Berg, one of the most important diamond merchants of Holland. Early in 1940, he gave my father a large number of diamonds to be cut, worth more than a hundred thousand dollars in American money. Then came the Nazi invasion, the Stuka bombing, all the horrors. Jan Van Den Berg disappeared. My father and I escaped to France."

"And the diamonds?" I murmured.

"We had to leave everything behind. Our home, our beautiful furniture, our garden." Hilda's voice broke. She was silent for a moment as she struggled for self-control. Then she continued. "Only the diamonds we took with us. The things that belonged to us, we left behind. But the diamonds belonged to Mr. Van Den Berg. My father hoped that somewhere he would find him and give back the diamonds."

"But you didn't find him?" I guessed.

Hilda shook her head. "Later we came to Cuba and finally we got a visa to enter the United States. We had only enough money to satisfy the authorities that we would not become public charges. We had no money to pay the duty on the diamonds."

"So you smuggled them into the country," I finished for her quickly, to save her the pain of going into those details.

"There was no other way."

"What has Kleber to do with all that?" I asked.

"A short time before the war, Kleber

had visited Amsterdam, which had been his native city before he went to the United States ten years ago. He was a good friend of Mr. Van Den Berg and stayed at his home. That is where my father first met him. When we came to the United States, it was an easy matter to find William Kleber, as we knew he was a research chemist."

"Why did you want him?"

"My father thought that if anyone knew where Mr. Van Den Berg was, or whether he was alive, Kleber would be the one. We thought perhaps that Mr. Van Den Berg had also come to the United States."

"Your father told Kleber about the diamonds?"

Hilda nodded. "Kleber showed us letters he had received from Mr. Van Den Berg. They were from Mexico, where Mr. Van Den Berg had gone. Kleber wanted my father to give him the diamonds. He said he would send them to Mr. Van Den Berg."

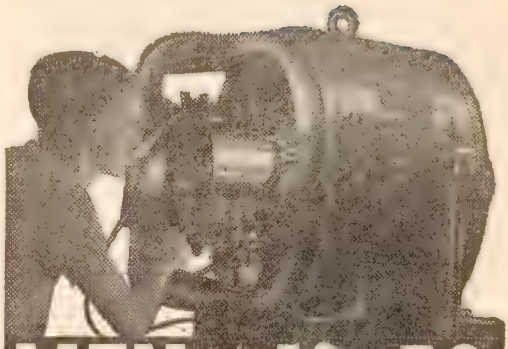
I SAID I thought the rest was clear. Hilda's father had refused to turn the diamonds over to Kleber. Then Kleber had murdered Hilda's father and made his death look like a suicide.

"But what about the diamonds?" I questioned.

"Kleber didn't get them," Hilda replied. "My father had imitation stones and those were the ones that were stolen."

Hilda had known that Kleber would make another attempt to steal the diamonds once he learned that the stones he had taken were glass. She had left the boarding house after the funeral and taken the job on the riverboat, which would bring her to New Orleans. From there she had hoped somehow to make her way to Mexico to find Van Den Berg.

"What about Munger and Horton?"



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I asked. "You never saw them before you got on this boat?"

"Never."

I nodded and explained the idea that had been shaping up in my mind while the girl was recounting her story.

"Kleber," I said, "must have hired the gunman for the job of stealing the diamonds. When they discovered that they had taken imitations, they decided to go after the real thing for themselves. That's why they trailed you to the boat and took jobs as deck hands. They had a couple of days before the *River Queen* sailed, and kept an eye on Kleber to make sure he didn't find you. When they trailed him to my office, they guessed why he hired me, and tried to put me out of the way until the boat left town, probably in the custody of some pal in St. Louis. Once the boat was under way, they figured they'd have a good chance to get the diamonds from you."

"But the dead one!" Hilda whispered. "Who killed him?"

I studied Hilda's face for her reaction as I answered, "Kleber."

"Kleber!" the exclamation was a frightened whisper. "On this boat!"

I nodded. "My guess is he's the man who attacked me on the levee just before the *River Queen* cast off. He had trailed me to the levee, overheard my questioning of one of the deck hands, who told me you were on the boat. That's all Kleber needed. He had hired me to find you so he could trail me to wherever you were. Once he had the information, he didn't want me on the boat."

Hilda's face was white.

I continued, "My guess is he stowed away on one of the barges; then when the boat was under way, he started out to find your cabin. Munger must have have seen him. There was a fight and Kleber shot the gunman. That was just as I arrived on the scene."

"But if Kleber is on the boat," Hilda

protested, "where could be hide? The men have been searching everywhere for you. They would have found him!"

"Naturally, Hilda. Except that they didn't think of searching your cabin!"

HILDA'S sudden indrawn breath was a gasp of horror as she turned towards the sound of the new voice. My back stiffened. A cold wave ran along my back to the nape of my neck.

The door of Hilda's locker had swung open. William Kleber stepped into the room from his hiding place. The heavy automatic in his hand was held carelessly, but I knew how swiftly he could bring it into action.

My eyes remained frozen on the automatic. For a moment it was the center of all attention. Everything, all our thoughts, revolved around it. There was a silencer on its snub nose. Munger had been shot with a silenced gun. After what may have been an eternity, my eyes lifted to Kleber's pudgy face.

"Well?" I said.

Kleber shrugged. "Now that you have pieced everything together, there is no sense of my staying hidden from you."

There was a gnawing, tightening feeling in my stomach. I knew what Kleber's words meant.

Kleber's eyes turned to Hilda. "Suppose," he said, "we make this as painless as possible. If you'll tell me where you've hidden the diamonds, we can get this thing over with very quickly. Otherwise——"

His shrug was a menacing suggestion.

"No!" Hilda's gasp was a barely audible whisper.

Kleber's automatic lifted, just an inch or two. It was in direct line with my stomach. "I'll shoot you first, Donovan," he said in a matter-of-fact tone. "Then I'll be able to proceed with my persuasion of Hilda uninterrupted and unworried by what you might do."

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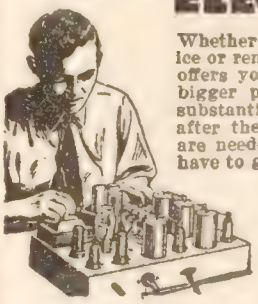

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"Oh, no!" Hilda's words seemed to have been wrenched from the depths of her throat. "You can't kill him!"

Those words, expressing concern for me at a moment of her own greatest danger, sent a warm glow through me. But only for the briefest flash of time. Because I knew that no matter what sort of feeling prompted Hilda's concern for me, it would be of no help to either of us now.

That Kleber would kill both Hilda and me, whether or not he found the diamonds, was beyond question. He had no other choice. We knew he had murdered Munger. In a way, that was an advantage to me. The knowledge was like a cold dash of water that helped clear my mind. It simplified my own course of action. You can't be a coward when you know you're doomed to die no matter what you do or don't do.

I stepped towards Kleber, my muscles tightening all over my body. There was a slim chance of saving Hilda. "Go ahead, Kleber, shoot!"

The automatic in Kleber's hand was steady. I could see there was no hesitation in his cold eyes.

The three of us in the cabin froze suddenly as the rap sounded on the door. For a moment, I didn't recognize the sound. It seemed to belong to another world, a world I had already given up.

In one stride, Kleber was at Hilda's side, pressing the automatic into her spine. He gestured us to the wall beside the door.

Kleber whispered something into Hilda's ear. I couldn't hear what he said.

"Who is it?" Hilda called. There was only a slight tremor in her voice.

The answer at the other side was low: "Jensen."

"What do you want?"

"Captain wants to talk to you." The voice was muffled.

"I can't see him now. I'm in bed."

I WAS beside Hilda and Kleber was immediately behind her. As Hilda spoke, I had been inching backwards. Suddenly, my right arm shot out, hammered Kleber's automatic upward. At the same time, I spun and brought myself around between him and Hilda. My left hand closed on Kleber's gunwrist, levered it upward. My right arm girdled his neck, pressed him close to me.

As we wrestled against the wall, I gasped to Hilda: "Open the door! Let Jensen in!"

I heard the key turn, heard the door open and shut.

"All right, you muggs! Cut it!"

Worms crawled up my back. I knew then it hadn't been Jensen at the door. The man who spoke behind me was Nucky Horton!

My arms dropped to my side. I whirled. Kleber jumped back. He still held his automatic. Now he was pointing it at Nucky Horton. The gunman held a revolver in his right hand. I recognized my .38 Colt Special that he had lifted from me at my office. He was pointing it at Kleber.

"A rat by any other name——" I grunted.

"Shut up!" Horton whispered fiercely.

Hilda had drawn back, her face white. Her brown eyes were larger than I had ever seen them before.

My eyes roved between Kleber and Horton. There was an electric tension in the way they faced each other, their guns lined on each other's stomach. Here was a complete stalemate. Each knew that no matter who might shoot first, the interval between the first and second shots would be infinitesmal. Both would end up with hot lead in their carcasses.

It was Kleber who broke the heavy silence. "Suppose we make a deal, Horton?"

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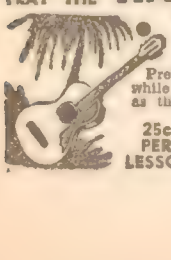

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Horton's eyes studied Kleber shrewdly. "Yeah?"

"We can either kill each other," Kleber murmured, "or we can go into partnership."

"Where's the ice?"

"The girl knows where it is."

Their eyes never strayed from each other's face. Finally Horton nodded.

"It's a deal," he murmured. "Get the ice."

Kleber glanced warily at Hilda. "Suppose," he said, "you make it easy for yourself, Hilda, and produce the diamonds?"

"You will never get them," Hilda whispered tautly.

Kleber shrugged. "You're very foolish. One way or another I will get them."

"*We'll* get them," Horton corrected.

"Of course," Kleber agreed, and continued to Hilda in an impersonal tone, "You smuggled them out of Holland, then into the United States. That is not an easy thing to do. Now you plan to smuggle them into Mexico, so you must have them with you."

"We all know that, Kleber!" Horton snapped. "But where?"

"Wait," Kleber murmured, "let's attack this problem logically."

"Logic, hell," Horton snorted. "I know a couple of better ways to make her come across!"

Kleber ignored the gunman. "Now, Hilda, how could you trust yourself to carry the diamonds around with you all this time? If they were hidden in a secret compartment of your traveling bag, you would always be in fear that you would become separated from your bag—lose it somewhere."

"So she's got 'em right on her somewhere!" Horton snapped.

"You want to tell us?" Kleber asked.

Unconsciously, Hilda drew away from Kleber.

Kleber smiled. "Isn't it strange, Hilda, that you always wear green dresses?

Is it only because green becomes you so well?"

HILDA'S hand went to her throat in a gesture of fear. I couldn't guess then what Kleber was driving at, but I sensed by Hilda's reaction that Kleber was getting warm in his mental search for the diamonds.

"Or," continued Kleber, "do you always wear green because then you can transfer those large green, cloth-covered buttons to whichever dress you decide to wear?"

Hilda's unhappy involuntary gasp was as clear an answer to Kleber's question as if she had verbally confirmed his guess that the three large buttons secreted the diamonds.

"Tear off those buttons, Hilda, and hand them to me," Kleber ordered.

"No!"

Nucky Horton took a cautious step towards Hilda, at the same time keeping an eye on Kleber. He and Kleber still held their guns lined on each other. "Let's do it the easy way, sweetheart. Hand 'em over."

I knew that if I was to act, it had to be now. I moved slowly towards Horton, careful to keep out of line of both guns.

"You wouldn't shoot, would you, Horton?" I murmured. "How would you clear yourself with the captain?"

He paused, glanced warily at me, but kept his gun lined on Kleber. "I'd clear myself, all right!" he snapped. "Stand still!"

I grinned, continued moving toward him from the side. "Go ahead, Horton. Shoot me down! Or you Kleber! Why don't you take a shot at me!" Their guns didn't waver from each other. "Afraid the other'd get the jump, aren't you!"

I dived suddenly, praying that my hunch had been right. I never knew

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PERSONALS

Will May E. Sleight, formerly of Independence, Kansas, later of Denver, Colorado, please communicate with Lester D. Dubrow, in care of this magazine? It will be to her interest to do so.

* * * *

Information regarding the present address of L. M. Renault, at one time a teacher in the El Paso, Texas, public schools, later a text-book writer who resided in a small town of up-state New York, is desired by Attorney Martin W. Dodge, in care of this magazine.

* * * *

Beatrice K. The letter finally came from Bert. Please get in touch with me at once. *Milly.*

whether it was or not. I knew only that Horton's gun wavered towards me for a moment, then back towards Kleber. Then it was too late.

The sound of Kleber's silenced automatic was like the plop of a pebble tossed into a stream. Horton drooped. His finger tightened automatically on his trigger. A shaft of flame ripped from his gun. There was a blast and the wild slug ploughed into the wall.

Then I was behind Horton as he buckled to the floor. Kleber had done what I had hoped he would. He had shot Horton down first, knowing I was unarmed. He continued triggering his automatic. I prayed that Horton's single shot would bring the rivermen on the run. Hilda, at least, might be saved. Horton's body jerked again and again. A couple of slugs went high and smashed into the door behind me.

My pent-up breath escaped in a sigh of thanks as I heard excited voices and the sound of running feet in the corridor. Horton's single revolver shot had aroused the rivermen. They couldn't have heard Kleber's silenced automatic.

FISTS pounded on the door. I heard the empty click of Kleber's automatic, leaped up. Evidently Kleber was no coward. Instead of waiting for me, he was lunging towards me, his automatic lifted as a club.

I saw it whipping down at my face, sidestepped, but not fast enough. It hammered into my shoulder with the force of a piston, numbed my left arm down to the tips of my fingers. My right fist streaked out from as far back as I could bring it, exploded in Kleber's hate-maddened face with a force that jarred me to my shoes.

Kleber careened backwards in quick, staggering steps, slammed to a stop when his back hit the wall, then settled slowly to the floor.

From behind me I heard Hilda's gasp. "Oh!"

I grinned and turned to open the door before the rivermen succeeded in smashing it down.

After I had explained all the details to Captain Oley, I turned to Hilda, sitting on her bunk, still white-faced.

"After we get things straightened out with the authorities," I said, "you'll need a guard when you take the diamonds to Van Den Berg. The job is too dangerous for a girl to manage alone."

"Oh, but I have no money to hire a guard," she protested worriedly.

"Who said I want money?" I grinned.

"But how can I pay you?" she cried. "How can I pay you for all you've already done for me!"

"You could smile for me once in a while. I haven't seen you smile yet, you know."

"Oh!"

She smiled.

"That, honey," I murmured, "is just the down payment."

THE END

Back Cover Solution

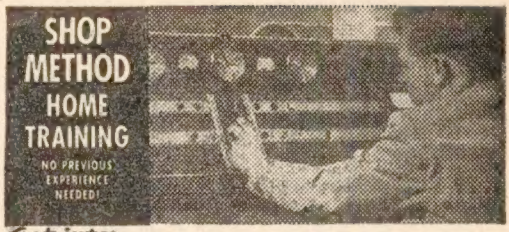
(See back cover)

Detective Sergeant Stacy rose to his feet, his face thoughtful. "In other words," he said, "you'd say he died as the result of an accident."

"Yes, sir. It's obvious, isn't it?"

Stacy shook his head. "You're overlooking a few less obvious facts. First, he was a mechanic—entirely familiar with airplanes. Yet, apparently, he stepped *forward* into the range of a whirling propeller. While a man of his experience could have carelessly *backed* into the blades, I can't conceive that he would step into them. Yet the position of the wound would indicate it. Second, notice the smear of blood on the propeller. The blades, in motion, move counterclockwise. If they had struck him while turning so, the blood would have to be on the opposite edge of the blade. Third, no experienced airplane mechanic would allow a plane engine to run unless chocks had been placed in front of the landing wheels—even though the brakes were set.

"No, Officer, this man was murdered! Further, I would say he was killed by someone totally unfamiliar with planes. By checking up on the dead man's acquaintances, I'm sure we'll find somebody just like that who had some motive for killing the mechanic."



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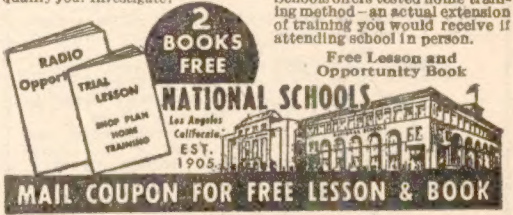

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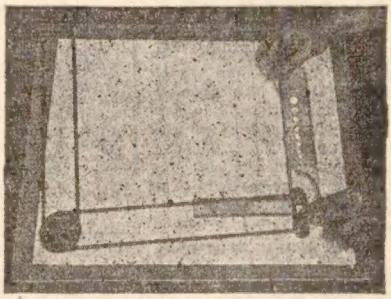

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